

BUDDHIST CONCEPT OF SPIRITUAL AND MINDFUL LEADERSHIP QUALITIES FOR SUSTAINABLE PEACE AND DEVELOPMENT

by Ven. Devinda*

ABSTRACT

The world today is in need of good and mindful leadership that can manage sustainable peace and development of the world. Peace is very much dependent on emotional management skills and mindful thought of the leaders. Most of the damage done to the world is partly due to lack of proper emotional management and mindfulness of the leaders. If a leader is skilful in controlling his or her anger and thought, he/she could transform it into love and compassion. The leader would not cause harm to the world or other fellow human beings. Leaders have greater capacity than their followers to do harm or to make peace. Therefore, leaders should be mindful and skilful in making decisions so as not to invoke any harm to fellow human beings including all living creatures. The Buddhist concept of emotional management is essential in modern world crises. This paper will discuss Buddhist mindful leadership concepts drawn from the Buddha's teachings, especially from the story of Māgha, which appears in the commentary of the Dhammapada and from the Kūṭadanta-sutta of Dīghanikāya.

*. Lecturer, Shan State Buddhist University, Myanmar.

1. INTRODUCTION

Leaders play a key role in every company, organization, institution, nation, religion and community. The success or failure, the development or downfall of these institutions solely depends on the quality of their leaders. Likewise, war and peace, destructive and constructive decision are mostly made by the leaders. Therefore, in order to bring about sustainable peace and development in this modern global age, mindful leadership is a much needed quality. Mindful leaders are thoughtful, tolerant, responsible and constructive. In Buddhism, many examples of advice from good leaders and good leadership are found, including mindful leadership. Mindful leadership quality found in Buddhism can be applied in many areas of contemporary society including spiritual, social, political and economically sustainable development. However, the Buddha emphasizes leadership that contributes to spiritual development. In this paper, the author is going to focus on mindful leadership quality as appearing in the story of Māgha (Dhp. A) and Kuṭadanta-sutta (DN.5) as relevant for present global issues. Firstly, the author will introduce the Buddhist concepts of mindful and spiritual leadership quality, secondly leadership quality as recounted in the story of Māgha, thirdly leadership quality drawn from Kūṭadanta-sutta and fourthly mindful leadership quality and social responsibility, and then present a conclusion.

2. CONCEPT OF LEADERSHIP IN GENERAL AND MINDFUL LEADERSHIP

There have been many leadership theories developed over time. Before presenting mindful leadership in Buddhism, firstly I would like to discuss some of the leadership categories presented by western scholars.

Weber wrote about three types of leadership authority such as traditional, legal and charismatic authority in his essay “The three types of legitimate rule” (Weber, 1958)⁽¹⁾. Traditional authority is the ability and the right to rule passed down through heredity, and legal authority and is empowered by a formalistic belief in

1. First published in 1922 in *Preussische Jahrbuecher*, 187: 1-12.

the content of law (legal) or natural law (rationality). Charismatic authority is found in a leader whose mission and vision inspire others. It is based upon the perceived extraordinary characteristics of an individual. Weber saw a charismatic leader as the head of a new social movement and one instilled with divine or supernatural powers, such as a religious prophet (Williams, 2003).

Karrah classified mindful leadership into two categories, one based on a meditative mindfulness practice, and another based on a non-meditative mindfulness process. Karrah defined that “a meditative practice has its roots in the Buddhist tradition of mindfulness. A non-meditative process is drawn from an empirical, attentional approach to mindfulness (Karrah, 2015, p. 17). Meditative leadership practices support for others to become mindful and non-meditative leadership process promotes distributed mindfulness through the organization (p. 30). Moreover, by looking at the different concepts of leadership qualities from the literature review, Karrah summarised the concept into “transformational, servant and authentic leadership in the framework of mindful leadership” (Karrah, 2015, p. 25). These three concepts, according to Karrah, are grounded in states of awareness, engagement, connection and actualization.

Transformational leadership is similar to the type of mindful leadership that engages with followers, is “attentive to the needs and motives of followers”, and tries “to help followers reach their fullest potential” (Northouse, 2013, p. 185). In servant leadership, the leader also helps followers realize their potential and achieve greater self-actualization and this is deep rooted in awareness and care for other’s wellbeing (Karrah, 2015, p. 28). Authentic leadership involves a leader with genuine desire to serve others and build a trusting relationship (George, 2003). Authentic leadership again can be viewed from three main perspectives: intrapersonal, interpersonal and developmental. Intrapersonal refers to a leader’s “self-knowledge, self-regulation, and self-concept” (Northouse, 2013, p. 254). Interpersonal is concerned with collective relational and reciprocal process between the leader and followers and the developmental refers to “something that can be nurtured” and developed over a period of time “rather than a fixed trait” (p. 254).

3. MINDFUL AND SPIRITUAL LEADERSHIP IN BUDDHISM

A good leadership in Buddhism is based on moral virtues, kindness, trustworthy, reliability, determination and intelligence. And mindful leadership in Buddhism means being mindful of one's behaviour, one's speech, one's thought, one's action and one's environments. According to the Buddha's teachings, one's speech and action originates from one's thought. The mind is the forerunner of everything, and by the mind, good and evil is done, then the results follow. The Buddha's teaching in Dhammapada is as follows.

Mind precedes all mental states. Mind is their chief;
they are all mind-wrought.

If with an impure mind a person speaks or acts suffering follows him
like the wheel that follows the foot of the ox (Dhp. 1).

Explanation: All that we experience begins with thought. Our words and deeds spring from thought. If we speak or act with evil thoughts, unpleasant circumstances and experiences inevitably result. Wherever we go, we create bad circumstances because we carry bad thoughts. This is very much like the wheel of a cart following the hoofs of the ox yoked to the cart. The cart-wheel, along with the heavy load of the cart, keeps following the draught oxen. The animal is bound to this heavy load and cannot leave it.⁽²⁾

Mind precedes all mental states. Mind is their chief;
they are all mind-wrought.

If with a pure mind a person speaks or acts happiness follows him
like his never-departing shadow (Dhp.2).⁽³⁾

Explanation: All that man experiences springs out of his thoughts. If his thoughts are good, the words and the deeds will also be good. The result of good thoughts, words and deeds will be happiness. This happiness will never leave the person whose thoughts are good. Happiness will always follow him like his shadow that never leaves him.⁽⁴⁾

2. http://www.buddhanet.net/dhammapada/d_twin.htm

3. <https://www.buddhanet.net/e-learning/buddhism/dp01.htm>

4. http://www.buddhanet.net/dhammapada/d_twin.htm

Therefore, the teaching in the Dhammapada suggests that mindful leadership quality must be based on the development of the mind. When the mind is well cultivated, it will project into good speech and good actions. The results also will be good. If the mind is corrupted, it will produce ill speech and bad action. And the result also will be terrible. Mindful leadership must be developed by cultivation (*bhāvanā*) which is termed as sammāsatti (right mindfulness) based on mindfulness meditation. By practising mindfulness meditation, the leader will become mindful of his or her own thoughts, speech and actions. Such a leader will do more good than harm to oneself, to others, to the environment, community, organization, nations and the world.

We can also apply the Noble Eightfold Path of the Buddha as mindful leadership qualities. The leader must have the right vision, right thought, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness and right concentration. These are the qualities that the spiritual leaders should possess in order to lead followers in the right direction. In brief, the Noble Eightfold Path can be summarised into three factors, morality (*sīla*), concentration (*samādhi*) and wisdom (*paññā*). A mindful leader should have self-control and maintain moral standards in order to win the trust and reliability of fellow humans. A mindful leader must also have a calm mind when dealing with problems or when facing difficulty. The concentrated mind will be able to see the problem and the cause of the problem clearly and will be able to make the right decision. And, wisdom is a very essential quality that mindful leaders should possess. Wisdom is not knowledge. Wisdom is the ability to penetrate and see what is right and wrong, what would be more beneficial and what would be right decision. It is the ability to understand the truth and to handle the situation fairly. Knowledge is mere learning, memorizing and having more information or facts. In short, these three qualities- morality, concentration and wisdom, should go together to produce a better result.

4. THE STORY OF MĀGHA AND LEADERSHIP QUALITY

In the Māgha story, the young man Māgha leads a group of 33 people working for community developments in Macala village. The village head becomes suspicious of their activities and fears

their work would ruin his dignity. He reports to the King, accusing them of organizing illegal activities. The King, without carefully investigating the case ordered the arrest of the group and gave them capital punishment by ordering an elephant to tread on them. However, due to the mindful thought and emotional management of the leader Māgha, all the followers listen to him without any reaction. He manages to calm down the elephant and convince the king of their innocence. He asks his fellow men not to get angry with the village head, the king and the elephant, instead asking them to cultivate loving kindness towards them. Surprisingly, the elephant dares not go near them for the first time, and this is reported to the King. The second time, the king orders that the group be covered with pieces of cloth and releases the elephant to tread on them once again. Again the elephant does not go near them and even runs away from them. This incident is reported to the King again, and the King, as he becomes thoughtful and mindful, realizes that these people might be innocent and asks his ministers to bring them to his court and carefully investigates the case.

Upon scrutiny, the king comes to know that they were wrongly accused of criminal deeds. Thus, the King orders their release and at the same time orders the arrest of the village head who is also removed from his post. The King, then, makes Māgha the village head with the privilege of eightfold special rewards including tax for eight villages, eight elephants, eight houses, eight servant men and women. Māgha and his thirty-two men enjoy the privilege, serve the country and carry more social welfare activities until the end of their lives. After they die, they all are reborn in Tāvattiṃsā heaven which names the newly reborn spirits after the 33 social workers while the Māgha himself becomes a Sakka, the King of gods. According to the Dhammapada commentary, the Buddha uttered that the seven qualities possessed by Māgha make him a good leader both in human life and as the King of gods. These seven are the spiritual qualities:

- i. Always take good care of parents
- ii. Always pay respect and honour the elders
- iii. Never utter backbiting or slandering

- iv. No avarice, always being generous to give and open minded.
- v. Always tell the truth
- vi. Never get angry,
- vii. If anger arises in him, he will quickly get rid of it.

Māgha was a young man and had a kind heart. He never tried to take advantage of others. He was not a self-centred person, but other-centred who always think for the others. He had a social outlook. When in a crowd, he prioritized seats for others. Such qualities became his traits and personality. He always took good care of his parents, and this represents a good example of social responsibility and respect for elders, being humble and lacking arrogance. The leader should not spend time slandering. If there is suspicion of anything, the leader will meet personally and talk to the person to clarify issues. The leader should not be stingy and envious; he should be generous to share with others what he has including being open minded and giving necessary advice to others. The leader must always be truthful without deceiving his followers or fellow citizens. There must be transparency regarding the aims and objectives of a project. Telling lies would lead to distrust and suspicion. The leader must be also tolerant and patient without showing anger. The leader should have the quality of self-control. If in any case, anger arises, a leader must calm down oneself and find the way to solve the problem by peaceful means.

Due to his kind heart and good leadership qualities, Magha convinced 32 fellow men to work with him faithfully. At first, he is alone doing the work of repairing roads, building bridges, digging wells, making shelters and providing drinking water for travelers. Later, like minded people admired him and joined him. So, they became known as the group of thirty-three philanthropists.

Therefore, Māgha's spirit should be fostered by younger generations to become mindful leaders able to serve the world and humanity. In relation to Māgha's achievement, becoming the lord of gods, the Buddha uttered the following verse,

“Heedfulness is always praised; heedlessness is ever blamed;

By heedfulness did Māgha attain the leadership of the gods” (Dhp. 30)⁽⁵⁾.

On the other hand, the village head who accused them of organizing illegal activities due to his jealousy is an example of a mindless leader and the King who ordered the 33 men to be killed represents a case of heedless and lack of mindful leadership quality. These are the lessons we can learn from this story.

5. KUṬADANTA-SUTTA AND LEADERSHIP QUALITY

In this Kūṭadanta-sutta, the Buddha relates his previous life story to a Brahmin Kūṭadanta who want to perform a more beneficial sacrifice. The Brahmin Kūṭadanta heard the news of the Buddha arriving in his village Khānumata. Having heard of the popularity of the Buddha for a long time, he wanted to meet the Buddha to receive advice on how to perform a sacrifice effectively to bring greater benefit. Then, the Buddha relates that once he was a King Mahāvijita and wanted to perform a great sacrifice. So, he summoned his advisor known as Purohita to give him some advice on how to perform a great sacrifice for more benefit. Upon discussion, the advisor to the King suggested that this was not yet the time to perform a great sacrifice as the country was still in turmoil, lacked peace and was economically unstable. The Brahmin Purohita then advised the king to give priority first to restoring peace and order by managing the state economy properly. He asked the King to give loans to the merchants who were engaging in trade, to provide various seeds to the peasants and to increase salary to government servants. The King followed the advice of Purohita and postponed his plan for a sacrifice. A few years later, he saw the fruits of the management, the country at peace, people engaging in their own work and enjoying their profits. No one was interested in insurgency. The tax of the country then was increasing. The treasure-house of the King became full.

Then, the King summoned his advisor, the Brahmin Purohita, again, to discuss the matter of performing a great sacrifice. The

5. Appamādena māghava, devānaṃ setthatam gato; appamadaṃ pasamsanti, pamādo garahito sadā.

Purohita said, 'well' it is a good time for organizing the great sacrifice. But to make it more beneficial, the sacrifice should be performed in a simple way. It should not involve forced labour, the killing of lives and destruction of land or property. He advised the King to avoid extravagance. He asked the king to just conduct a sacrifice by offering honey, ghee, butter, oils and fruits to the gods and to perform a sacrifice of offering free food to people of different classes. Hearing of the King's intention of performing sacrifice, his ministers, subordinate state rulers, officers, traders, merchants came to pay tribute to the King with many treasures. As the treasure house of the King was already full, he asked those well-wishers to take back their gifts for personal use. However, no one was taking back their intended presents for the King, so they set up stalls at the city gates and distributed free food and other items to the poor and travelers as part of joining a great sacrifice for the King and showing their gratitude to him. The King was very happy and everyone was delighted.

This is how a good leader should be, according to the Buddha's teaching. *Kūṭadanta-sutta* gives us a lot of lessons on good leadership. The leader should be thoughtful, respect elders and listen to good advice. The leader should also be mindful, avoid harming living beings and instituting forced labour. The country's economy should be properly managed with wise expenditure. The story also teaches how to maintain peace and order and practise ecological preservation. A Mindful leader brings more sustainable peace and development. The Buddha's concept of good leadership is based on spiritual and moral values.

The leader is considered the parent of the nation, a person who is responsible and accountable for the lives and wellbeing of all concerned. The leader should consider plans for long term benefit and sustainable peace and development. The leader should not just give commands like dictator. A leader should listen to constructive feedback and implement accordingly. It also teaches that mindful leadership is the ability to be aware of the present situation, understand the problem and discover the way to solve the problem. The King Mahāvijita was well aware of the situation of his country and he could make the right decision whether the time is right to

perform such a great sacrifice. Without being mindful of what is going on in the country, a leader would not be able to make the right decision. This is partly due to the wise advisor, Purohita. Good mindful leadership is a combination of wisdom and compassion. Without being compassionate, a good leader would not listen to his minister's advice. Instead he or she would enforce personal wishes, having the power to do so. Both the King and the advisor have the quality of compassion, thinking for the people of the country as well as for the living beings.

Another lesson that can be drawn from this sutta is the awareness of interconnectedness. One of the core Buddhist teachings is that everything is interdependent, nothing exists on its own. So, the King and his advisor were well aware that the prosperity of the Nations and their luxuries depend on the well-being of their fellow citizens. Moreover, they were also aware of ecological impact as they avoided destroying lives and forests in performing a great sacrifice. These are the mindful leadership qualities that can be learnt from Kūṭadanta-sutta.

6. MINDFUL LEADERSHIP QUALITY AND SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY

In Buddhism, social outlook and thought for fellow beings to alleviate suffering, started with Buddha himself since in the beginning he took a vow of Bodhisatta. If he were merely thinking for himself, he would have attained Arahathship in that very life and have no more rebirths. However, out of compassion for the world, the Bodhisatta, Sumedha, asked to become the future Buddha to liberate gods and men from suffering as much as possible (Ja. a 2-95). He declared three missions:

If I know the Dhamma or the truth, I will make others know (budho bodheyyaṃ)

If I liberate, I will make others liberate (motto moceyyaṃ) and

If I cross over the sea, I will make the others cross over (tiṇṇo tāreyyaṃ)

And also the Buddha had three objectives which are:

- i. To strive for himself to become an Enlightened One (*Buddhatthacariya*)
- ii. To work for the welfare of the kits and kin (*Ñātatthacariya*) and
- iii. To work for the welfare of the whole world of gods and men (*lokatthacariya*) (Ja.a.I)

After attaining enlightenment and converted 60 followers on his path, he set up a community of the Sangha (Vin.I.20). At the very first rain retreat, he converted 60 people to arahatship. At the end of the vassa or rain retreat, he sent out the 60 arahats to spread his message:

“Go forth, O monks, on your wanderings, for the good of the many, for the happiness of the many, out of compassion of the world, for the good, welfare and happiness of gods and man. Let not go two monks of you in the same direction. O monks, proclaim the Dhamma which is good at the beginning, at the middle and at the end” (Vin.1.20).

These are the examples of good mindful leadership qualities displayed by the Buddha to be followed by humans and applied in working for the social welfare of the world. Buddhism is always socially orientated as the Buddha always teaches people to work for the welfare of others. However, to be more effective, the Buddha always encouraged cultivation of oneself first by following the path of mindfulness. Therefore, the story of Maghā as a social worker reminds us to be kind, generous, self-controlled, responsible and having a sense of gratitude. The points in both the story of the life of the Buddha and the Māgha are good examples and good motivation for Buddhists to work for the welfare of the world with mindfulness. Regarding this, another Dhammapada verse, taught by the Buddha, says that,

Just as a bee in a flower
harming neither hue nor scent
gathers nectar, flies away,
so in towns a Wise One fares (Dhp. 49)⁽⁶⁾.

6. Yathāpi bhamaro puppham, vaṇṇagandhamāhethayam; pāleti rasamādaya, evaṃ gāme muni care.

Explanation: The bee extracts honey from flowers without damaging either the colour or the fragrance of the flower and in so doing helps the tree bear much fruit. Similarly, the silent sage goes about the village collecting alms without harming anyone even minutely, and in so doing helps people gain much merit and happiness.⁽⁷⁾

Even though this verse is taught by the Buddha to a monk, it can apply to every leader with regard to being mindful in serving humanity, avoiding doing harm, damage or destruction. A good leader should consider for the safety and security all people concerned, citizens or fellow human beings before making a decision. A mindful leader must consider not only for human beings, but also for the ecological impact or natural environment which could endanger the next generations such as disaster and global warming.

Moreover, the teaching of the Buddha further said that,

“He who protects oneself protects others.

Therefore, the wise always taught to protect oneself [well]” (AN. II. 374)⁽⁸⁾.

Therefore, by protecting others, one is protecting oneself; by protecting oneself, one is protecting others. By protecting oneself here means being mindful of oneself and by protecting others means being mindful not to hurt or harm others. Human beings are interconnected just as all the natural world. These are the thoughts of leadership qualities given by the Buddha. If applied properly, each and everyone can contribute towards sustainable peace and development in the world.

A Shan scholar monk from Myanmar, Venerable Prof. Dr. Khammai Dhammasāmi, in his talk to his students on the scholarship awarding ceremony at S.D Avenue Hotel in Bangkok on 15. 01. 2019 that “To be a good leader one must think for the

7. The translation and explanation are retrieved from http://www.buddhanet.net/dhammapada/d_flower.htm on 24/01/2019

8. “Yoca rakkhatiattānam, rakkhitotassabāhiro;
Tasmārakkheyyaattānam, akkhatopaṇḍitosadā”ti

others. If one thinks for oneself, he will lose self-confidence. If one thinks for the others, learn to serve others, he will be more confident, and also must have a positive thinking". He further said, "those who think for others, never feel timid, those who think for oneself feel timid, he who think for others is always energetic, so live your life for many". To be compassionate and to serve humanity is also one element of the core teaching of the Buddha for Buddhist spiritual and mindful leadership quality.

7. CONCLUSION

As highlighted above, mindful spiritual leadership in Buddhism has been taught by the Buddha and the life stories of the Buddha have been good examples for good leadership in different fields such as spiritual, social, political and economical contexts. Whatever field one is leading, one must be a mindful and responsible leader in order to lead followers in the right direction, for greater benefits and effectiveness. According to Buddhism, the way to train one to become a mindful leader is to practice mindfulness meditation. A Vietnamese Zen Buddhist monk, Thich Nhat Hanh, stated in his book, *Peace is Every Breath: A Practice for Our Busy Lives* on mindfulness practice that, "Mindfulness is the energy that makes us fully present, fully alive... Mindfulness is what brings us back in touch with what's happening in the present moment in our body, in our feelings, in our thinking, and also in our environment" (Hanh, 2011, pp.5-6). One can do meditation everyday for just five to 15 minutes in the early morning or in the evening to foster the habit of mindfulness by closing eyes and paying attention to one's breathing in and out at the beginning. To achieve a more mindful quality, one has to practise for a longer period, not just breathing in and out, but also to be well aware of one's six senses. Mindfulness practice can be also done in four postures i.e. sitting, lying down, walking and standing. At work, one can also practice mindfulness before work starts by closing the eyes and concentrating on the breathing for one or two minutes, then one will be able to do the job mindfully, with less stress, less distraction and fewer mistakes. Therefore, to summarize the above two stories, to be a mindful leader, one has to cultivate love and compassion for others. One should not be self-centred; one should think for others or create a win win situation.

The Māgha story and the Kūṭadanta sutta provide non-meditative mindful leadership qualities during a critical situation and the ability to make a right decision by calming oneself, transforming one's emotion into love and compassion, and by careful reflection on the situation. The Buddhist concept of mindful leadership theory goes beyond three leadership theories of Weber as it emphasizes ethical and spiritual development.

References

- Aṅguttaranikāya*: Bodhi, Bhikkhu. (trans.) (2012). *The numerical Discourses of the Buddha*. Boston: Wisdom.
- Dīghanikāya, M. Walshe. (1996). *Long Discourses of the Buddha*, 2nd revised edition. Boston: Wisdom.
- Jātakatṭhakathā*: S.Shaw. (trans.) (2006). *The Jataka: Birth Stories of the Bodhisatta*, New Delhi: Penguin.
- Burlingame, E. W (trans.) (1982). *Buddhist Stories from the Dhammapada Commentary Part I*, Kandy: The Buddhist Publication Society.
- Hanh, T. N. (2011). *Peace is every breath*. New York, NY: HarperCollins.
- Karrah, D.J. (2015). *Toward a Deeper Awareness: Becoming a Mindful Educational Leader*, (A PhD Thesis), University of Calgary.
- George, B. (2003). *Authentic leadership: Rediscovering the secrets to creating lasting value*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Northouse, P. G. (2013). *Leadership: Theory and practice* (6th ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Weber, M. (1958). *The three types of legitimate rule*. Berkeley Publications in Society and Institutions, 4 (1): 1-11. Translated by Hans Gerth.
- Williams, D. (2003). *Max Weber: Traditional, Legal-Rational, and Charismatic Authority*. Ohio: The University of Akron. Retrieved from <http://gozips.uakron.edu/~dw2/papers/authority.pdf> on 04/07/2018.

