



# Buddhism and Democracy

A Talk Given by Ron Epstein, Ph.D.

Chancellor Emeritus, Dharma Realm Buddhist University on May 18, 2019 at City of Ten Thousand Buddhas

---

One of the distinctions that I learned about when I first became a Buddhist was that some people distinguished between political monks and true cultivators.

I romantically thought that true cultivators were monks who lived apart from society, up in the mountains and meditated in caves. But I was quickly disabused of this distinction, because it was neither very helpful nor completely correct. If we want to roughly describe a political monk, with all of the negative connotations associated with the term, and the qualities of true cultivators, it makes sense to look at their motivation rather than their location. The term “political monks” refers to those who cultivate and engage in politics for the sake of their own political goals, goals which have nothing to do with the Dharma.

Whereas, true cultivators, regardless of whether they are involved with politics or politicians, or whomever, are people who do everything a hundred percent for the sake of the Dharma and for ending the suffering of sentient beings. That can sometimes be very difficult, very dangerous, and even cost people their lives.

Even during the time of the Buddha, the Buddha himself sometimes had to deal with very unsavory characters in order to protect the Buddhist community, not only the monastic community, but also the fourfold assembly. I would also like to call to your attention to King Ajatasattu, who appears many times in the Buddhist sutras. He was certainly not a good person. He killed his

當我剛開始學佛的時候，學會區分兩種佛教徒：一種是政治和尚；另一種是真正的修行者。

起初，我天真地以為，真正的修行者應該是離群索居，在深山裡打坐修行。但我很快就發現，這種區分毫無幫助，也不正確。如果我們想在定義上區分，在文字上帶有貶義的「政治和尚」，和「真正修行者」之間的差別，比較有意義的作法是，先理解他們的動機，而不是他們所處的地點。「政治和尚」指的是修行並參與政治——但為的是與佛法無關的個人政治目的。他們參與政治跟政客往來的動機都與佛法無關。

反之「真正的修行者」，他們不論是參與政治，或與政治人物往來，完全都是為了弘法利生。參與政治可能讓他們的處境很困難，也很危險，有時甚至可能會喪命。

即使是在佛陀時代，佛陀也不得不和棘手的政治人物周旋，以保護佛教、保護四眾弟子和道場。比方，佛經中多次出現的阿闍世王。他絕對不是個良善的人，為了早日登基，殺害父親並囚禁母親。有一部經典與今天的主題相關，這一部

# 佛教與民主

法界佛教大學榮譽教授易象乾博士2019年5月18日講於萬佛聖城大殿

father and imprisoned his mother in order to gain political power.

Also in the teachings of the Buddha, in the *Pali Canon*, in the long discourses of the Buddha—in a discourse called the *Lion's Roar on the Turning of the Wheel*— we find a universal ruler, a wheel turning monarch, whom is about to retire and gives advice on ruling to his son who is will be his successor.

The ruler in this text says: “What is the duty of an Aryan wheel turning monarch? It is this, my son, you need to depend upon honor, revere, cherish, and venerate the Dharma. Take the Dharma as your badge and banner, and acknowledge the Dharma as your master. You should establish, guard, ward, and protect for your own household, troops, and nobles according to the Dharma, and preserve vassals, including Brahmins and householders, town and country folk, ascetics and Brahmins, and for beasts and birds. Let no crime prevail in your kingdom, and to those who are in need, give them property.”

The king is saying that in order to keep harmony in his kingdom, it's not only necessary to have spiritual equality, but also a certain amount of material equality. From an agricultural context, what he says is that if societal problems start getting out of hand, one should try leveling the playing field by having some kind of land reform. This is not a topic that we usually expect to read about in Buddhist texts.

The king continued, “From time to time if ascetics

經典是巴利文《大藏經》，長部中的一部，經名叫作《轉輪聖王師子吼經》。下面要談的這一段經文是將退位的轉輪聖王，提供意見給即將登基的兒子。

這段經文是轉輪王的兒子請教父親：「然者！大王！轉輪聖王之職責者何耶？」

轉輪聖王回答，說：「我子！汝當依彼法，恭敬、尊重法，為法幢、法幟、以法為首，善守護正法，又應護視庶民、車隊、刹帝利、群臣、婆羅門、居士、農商、沙門婆羅門等乃至禽獸，而且，於汝之國土中，勿留有任何惡法。若於汝之國土，有貧窮者，當與彼財寶。」

轉輪聖王告誡兒子說，為了保持國家的和諧，不僅需要讓人民在精神上平等，還要讓國民保持一定程度的物質平等，其中甚至還提及土地改革。經文上說如果社會問題變得無法控制，人們應該嘗試以土地改革方式達到立足點的平等，這些內容在佛經中都是少見的。

在經文中，轉輪聖王接著對他兒子說：「若於汝國土之沙門、婆羅門，已離去憍慢懈怠、獨修忍辱仁愛、調御自己、靜止自己、寂靜自己者，汝應時往彼處，作如是問：賢者！如何是善、如

and Brahmins who have announced a life of ascetic renunciation, who are devoted to forbearance and gentleness, and who tame themselves, striving to end craving, come to consult you on what is wholesome and unwholesome, what is blameworthy or blameless, what is to be followed and what is not to be, and what actions will harm or benefit the welfare of the kingdom; you should listen. That, my son, is the duty of an Aryan wheel turning monarch.”

What then happens when the monarch does not follow these instructions? The text seems to imply that this is the beginning of a downward cycle, a cycle that begins with the inequality of wealth and leads to widespread robbery, etc. This cycle leads to more and more societal deterioration. When it hits bottom, then people will realize that it's necessary to live with good character and righteousness, only then do things start improving as the cycle reverses itself.

The text continues explaining that the downward spiral is the result of improper rule.

It says, “Thus from not giving property to the needy, poverty became rife from the growth of poverty. The taking of what was not given increases from the increase of theft, and the use of weapons increases from the increased use of weapons. The taking of life increases and from the increase in the taking of life, and people's lifespans also decrease.”

Thus from the time of the Buddha, this discourse provides us with a description of what is going on around the globe right now. Some of you may be thinking, “This may be true, but why are you talking to us about this? None of us are rulers. None of us have high government positions. So what does this have to do with us?”

The reason why I wanted to talk with you about this topic, is because Buddhism in the world today is in a position for which there is no equivalent in the whole history of Buddhism up to today.

☯ To be continued

何是不善、如何是罪、如何是無罪、如何是可以行、如何是不可以行？又行何法者，於長夜應受不利益及痛苦；行何法者，於長夜應受利益與安樂？聞之，不善者離去，善者常受持。我子！此為轉輪聖王之職責。」

那麼，當轉輪聖王的繼承者不依循這些教導來治理國家，會發生什麼呢？經文中似乎隱喻著國家會開始衍生一連串的惡性循環，像是財富分配不均就會衍伸出搶劫等等的問題；這個惡性循環會導致更嚴重的社會惡化。當情況壞到極點的時候，人們才會意識到，必須依循良好的道德標準過生活，只有那時情況才會逐漸改善。

經文繼續闡述，如果轉輪聖王的繼承者治理不當將會導致一連串的衰敗。

經文上說：「如是，諸比丘！因對貧窮者不給與財寶，貧窮者即越增多，由於貧窮者之增多，偷盜便益滋增；由於偷盜之滋增，刀杖便滋增；由於刀杖之滋增，殺害便頻發；由於殺害之增多，彼等眾生之壽命縮短、顏色衰退。由於刀杖之滋增，殺害便頻發；由於殺害之增多，彼等眾生之壽命縮短、顏色衰退。」

雖然經文講的是佛陀那個時代的狀況，但也反映現在這個世界正在發生的情況。有些人可能覺得這個看法聽起來似乎有點道理，可是為什麼要跟我們講這些？我們都不是執政者，也沒有在政府部門擔任要職，這和我們有什麼關係呢？

我之所以想和大家討論這個話題，是因為在現代的社會中，佛教所處的地位和過去完全不同。

☯ 待續