Chapter Six

THE REPERCUSSIONS OF LACK OF PROPER GOVERNANCE

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Better than sole reign over the earth
Going to heaven
Or lordship over the whole world
Is the fruit of stream entry.
—The Dhammapada (178)

The early discourses preserved in the Pāli Nikāyas as well as their parallels in the Chinese Āgamas do not give much attention to political theory. This is due to their overarching interest in matters of soteriology. To some extent, principles of good government can be teased out from the description of social decline given in the Discourse on the Wheel Turning Monarch. During the period of early Buddhist thought reflected in the early discourses, the motif of the wheel turning monarch did not present a model of governance to be emulated by other rulers (Anālayo 2011b and 2012). Nevertheless, within its soteriological embedding the same motif can be taken to convey basic principles that do have a bearing on questions such as proper governance and harmonious ways of living in
This holds in particular for the description of a gradual deterioration of living conditions as described in the passage translated below. Needless to say, it stands in continuity with the importance given in the Buddhist traditions in general to apprehensions of an impending decline (Nattier 1991).

I translate below the relevant section of the Discourse on the Wheel Turning Monarch from the *Dirgha Āgama* preserved in Chinese translation (T.I.40b15; Anālayo 2014: 7–11), reflecting a Dharma-guptaka line of textual transmission (Anālayo 2015: 50). This has counterparts in the *Dīgha Nīkāya* (D.III.64, 27) and the *Madhyama Āgama* (T.I.521c1), apparently transmitted by reciters of the wider Sarvāstivāda (Anālayo 2017). Having described the successful governance by previous kings who followed the dharma of the predecessors, the extract sets in stating that the present king failed to follow traditional norms and practices.

Translation: An Extract from the *Dirgha Āgama*

This single king just governed the country on his own [will]; he did not continue the ancient dharma. His government was unstable, everyone was complaining, the territory was declining, and the people were withering away.

Then a brahmin minister approached the king and said: “Great king, you should know that the territory is now declining and the people are withering away. Things are not turning out as usual. Now the king has many good friends in the country, who are wise and erudite, knowledgeable in things ancient and modern. They are equipped with knowledge of how earlier kings governed rightly by the dharma. Why not command them to gather and ask what they know, so that they will personally give their replies?”

Then the king summoned his many ministers and asked them about the way earlier kings had governed. Then the wise ministers provided answers on these matters. The king heard what they said and implemented the old way of governing and protecting the world by means of the dharma. However, he was unable to aid solitary elderly people as well as to provide for the lowly and destitute.

Then the people of the country in turn became quite impoverished. Consequently they took from one another by force and theft increased greatly. It being investigated, they seized one of them, took him to the king, and said: “This man is a thief. May the king deal with him.”

The king asked him: “Is it true that you are a thief?” He replied: “It is true. I am poor and hungry, unable to maintain myself. Therefore I have become a thief.” Then the king supplied him with goods from his treasury and said: “With these goods support your parents and care for your relatives. From now on, do not become a thief again!”

Other people in turn heard that the king was giving wealth to those who engage in theft. Thereupon they further engaged in stealing the property of others. It being investigated, they again seized one of them, took him to the king, and said: “This man is a thief. May the king deal with him.”

The king asked again: “Is it true that you are a thief?” He replied: “It is true. I am poor and hungry, unable to maintain myself. Therefore I have become a thief.” Then the king again supplied him with goods from his treasury and said: “With these goods support your parents and care for your relatives. From now on, do not become a thief again!”

Again people heard that the king was giving wealth to those who engage in theft. Thereupon they further engaged in stealing the property of others. It being investigated, they again seized one of them, took him to the king, and said: “This man is a thief. May the king deal with him.”

The king asked again: “Is it true that you are a thief?” He replied: “It is true. I am poor and hungry, unable to maintain myself. Therefore I have become a thief.” Then the king thought: ‘At first, seeing that they were poor, I gave the thieves wealth, so that they would stop. But other people have heard
of it and in turn imitated each other even more, and robbery increases daily. This will not do. Let me now rather have that man pilloried. I will command that he be [paraded through] the streets and alleys, and then taken out of the city to be executed in the wilds, as a warning to other people.’

Then the king ordered his attendants: “Have him bound, beat a drum to announce the command, and [parade] him through the streets and alleys. This done, take him out of the city and execute him in the wilds.”

The people in the country came to know that someone who had become a thief was taken and bound by the king. [The king] commanded that [the criminal] be [paraded] through the streets and alleys and executed in the wilds. Then the people said to one another in turn: “If we are labelled as thieves, we will be like that, not different from him.” Then the people in the country, to protect themselves, consequently made themselves weapons to fight with, swords and bows with arrows. They repeatedly killed and injured each other when [they] attacked to plunder.

From the time this king came [to the throne], poverty started. There being poverty, robbery started. Robbery being there, fighting with weapons ensued. There being fighting with weapons, there was killing and harming. There being killing and harming, [people’s] complexions became haggard and their lifespan shorter. Then, from having been forty thousand years, people’s actual lifespan subsequently became less and in turn was twenty thousand years.

Although there were living beings that had such a lifespan, some died prematurely, and some were distressed and some were delighted. Those who were distressed in turn gave rise to adultery, their minds being in the grip of lust. Many devised ways and schemed to get the property of others. Then people, who were poor, robbed and fought with weapons. Killing and harming in turn increased greatly. People’s life [expectancy] in turn diminished and their lifespan was ten thousand years.

At the time of becoming ten thousand years old, living beings further robbed each other. It being investigated, they seized one of them, took him to the king, and said: “This man is a thief. May the king deal with him.” The king asked: “Is it true that you are a thief?” He replied: “I did not do it.” Then he intentionally spoke falsehood in the midst of the assembly.

Because of poverty, those living beings had turned to engaging in robbery. Because of robbery, there was in turn fighting with swords. Because of fighting with swords, there was in turn killing and harming. Because of killing and harming, there was being in the grip of lust and adultery. Because of being in the grip of lust and adultery, there was falsehood. Because of falsehood, their lifespan in turn decreased until it was a thousand years.

At the time of becoming a thousand years old, there began in turn to emerge three [more] evil verbal activities in the world: (1) slanderous speech, (2) harsh speech, and (3) gossip. When these three evil [verbal] activities in turn flourished, the lifespan of people decreased to five hundred years.

At the time of becoming five hundred years old, living beings gave rise to three more evil practices: (1) unlawful sexual desires, (2) unlawful greed, and (3) wrong views. When these three evil activities flourished in turn, the lifespan of people decreased to three hundred . . . two hundred . . . until, as in our present time, people reach one hundred years, few exceeding this and many achieving less.

In this way, because of endless evil, their lifespan in turn diminishes until it [eventually] reaches ten years. When people become ten years, females are married off when they are five months old. At that time one no longer hears in the world the names of ghee, rock honey, dark rock honey, or of any sweet delicacies. Rice seeds and rice seedlings turn into grass and weeds. Silk, silken cloth, brocade, cotton, white wool, what now in the world is called a “garment,” are at that time not seen at all. Fabrics woven from coarse hair will be the best kind of clothing.
At that time many thorny bushes grow on this earth and there are many mosquitoes, gadflies, flies, fleas, snakes, vipers, wasps, centipedes, and poisonous worms. Gold, silver, lapis lazuli, pearls—what are called gems—completely disappear into the earth. On the earth there are only clay stones, sand, and gravel.

At that time living beings never ever hear any more the names of the ten wholesome [actions]. The world will be just full of the ten unwholesome [actions]. When the names of the good qualities are no longer present, how could those people get to cultivate wholesome conduct?

At that time living beings are capable of being extremely evil. There is no filial piety towards parents, no respect for teachers and elders, no loyalty, and no righteousness. Those who are rebellious and have no principles are esteemed. It is just as nowadays those are esteemed who are [instead] capable of cultivating wholesome conduct, of filial piety towards parents, of respecting teachers and elders, of being loyal, trustworthy, and righteous, of following principles and cultivating compassion.

At that time living beings recurrently engage in the ten evils and often fall into evil ways. On seeing one another, living beings constantly wish to kill one another. They are just like hunters on seeing a herd of deer. Then on this earth there are many ravines, deep gorges with rushing rivers. The earth is a wasteland. Human beings are scarce. People go about in fear. At that time fighting and plundering manifest.

**A Study of the Text and Its Implications for Good Governance**

The above extract depicts a gradual deterioration of living conditions and lifespan. It relates all of that to the system of governance that a particular king adopted. According to the text, the problem with that king was that he governed his country on the basis of his own ideas and will. He neglected to follow the examples of his predecessors who had adhered to the dharma. Even when he attempted to adjust his rule, the king still lacked the compassionate concern required of rulers by way of taking proper care of the poor.

A minor but noteworthy difference among the parallel versions occurs in relation to the first thief. The *Madhyama Āgama* version specifies that the thief was caught by the owner himself (T.I.522b1). This indication fits the flow of the narration well, since when later thievery is being punished, people take up weapons and start to kill those they rob. This would be a logical consequence of thieves earlier being arrested by the owner(s), since by killing the owner(s) one could avoid being arrested and then be punished by the king. In fact the *Madhyama Āgama* discourse (T.I.522b27) reports that people, on taking up arms, think that "when stealing goods, if we catch the owner of those goods, we will cut off his head."

Another point worth mentioning from a comparative perspective concerns the eventual all-time low of moral decline. According to the *Dīgha Nikāya* report (D.III.72, 8), the breakdown of family relationship at this time goes so far as to affect even sexual conduct, in that people will copulate with each other like animals, without respect for one’s mother, aunt, or teacher’s wife.

The whole decline sets in, as already pointed out by Collins (1998: 486), “once the initial move has been made—where this (unnamed) king governs ‘according to his own ideas’—even well-intentioned actions have bad results. Subsequently . . . once the deterioration has set in, each new generation sees one or more further vices arise to join the others.” In this way, as explained by Gombrich (1988: 84), “this text states that stealing and violence originate in poverty and that poverty is the king’s responsibility . . . [it] shows awareness of social developments as unintended consequences of human omissions or commissions.” Bhikkhu Bodhi (2016: 168) similarly notes that in this way “poverty is regarded as the breeding ground of
criminality and the alleviation of poverty thus becomes one of the royal duties.” Harris (1997: 9) notes the implicit importance accorded to compassion in this discourse, in as much as “lack of compassion for the poor leads to the disintegration of society.”

In this way, lack of adherence to *dharma* is the first trigger for decline, followed by lack of compassion. Once these two are in place, decline cannot be reversed even with in itself well-intentioned interventions (such as giving to those who steal, an action that has the unintended effect of encouraging others to steal as well). This in turn implies that, according to the passage translated above, adherence to the *dharma* and genuine compassion are two chief principles that make for good governance and just rule.

The term *dharma* itself can of course carry a range of different meanings (Geiger 1920; Carter 1978). Judging from the *Bālapañcita Sutta* of the Majjhima Nikāya, however, it seems that in the context of the rule of a wheel turning monarch the notion of *dharma* stands in close relation to ethical conduct. This can be seen in the description of the wheel turning monarch’s peaceful conquest. Heralded by the wheel-treasure that has magically manifested in mid-air, the wheel turning monarch approaches the countries in the four directions. The minor kings from these countries welcome him with gifts and invite him to rule. In reply, the wheel turning monarch simply requests them to follow the five precepts of abstaining from killing, from taking what is not given, from sexual misconduct, from falsehood, and from intoxication (M.III.173, 4).

The parallels to the *Bālapañcita Sutta* do not have such a detailed description of the conquest of the wheel turning monarch (Anālayo 2011a: 746). Nevertheless, a similar description can be found in the *Ekottarika Āgama* parallel to the *Makhādeva Sutta*, point to similar concerns with establishing a sound foundation in moral conduct. In particular, this requires refraining from killing, theft, sexual misconduct, and falsehood. In fact, according to the assessment by de Silva (2003: 39), the wheel turning monarch’s own “moral authority rests on the fact that he practises and promotes pañcasīla as a constant basis of moral discipline in all matters big and small.” Needless to say, the keeping of these basic moral precepts does not exhaust the notion of following the *dharma*.

Nevertheless, in the present context such ethical conduct can be seen to enshrine the very foundation for living according to the *dharma*. The relevance of this suggestion to the tale translated above is evident in the depiction of the gradual deterioration of moral standards. As mentioned above, in the Pāli version this goes so far as to lead to incest.

On this interpretation, the two principles of good governance that suggest themselves from the above passage could be summarized as adherence to the basic ethical principles enshrined in the five precepts and cultivating a compassionate attitude rather than ruling out of a thirst for power. These two basic principles, on being put into practice by those in political power as well as their citizens, would indeed make the world a better place.
Conclusion

The three versions of the *Discourse on the Wheel Turning Monarch* depict a gradual decline of living conditions, lifespan, and moral standards. All of these have their origins in the decision of the king who failed to follow the exemplary style of governance of earlier kings, who ruled according to the *dharma*.

Dire consequences of idiosyncratic rule as depicted in the above text point to two key principles that would ensure good governance: maintenance of moral conduct and compassionate dispositions of the ruler towards his/her subjects.
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# Abbreviations

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<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
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<tbody>
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<td>A</td>
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<td>BCE</td>
<td>Before Common Era</td>
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<td>et al</td>
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Justice and Statecraft


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