



# Buddhist Monks and Politics

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Essays on Buddhist History & Culture

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According to the tradition the Buddha's father Suddhodana was a king of the Sakyans although there is very little evidence of this. Only twice in the Tipitaka is Suddhodana called a *raja* and while in the 5<sup>th</sup> century BCE this word had come to mean 'king' it still retained its earlier meaning of chief or leader. The Tipitaka tells us that the Sakyans had a body of men called 'raja makers' (*rajakattaro*), almost certainly a body of clan elders who elected someone from amongst themselves to rule over the chieftom for a certain period or for as long as he had their confidence. Kings are not elected, and they don't rule for one or two terms and then step down. Suddhodana was not a king, he was an elected chief. Other than this we know virtually nothing about the Buddha's father, but this does tell us that the Buddha came from a family with a background in politics.

There is one Sakyan chief about whom we do have some information and that is Bhaddiya, a relative of the Buddha. When the Buddha made his first return visit to Kapilavatthu, a group of men decided to become monks including Bhaddiya, who resigned his position as chief in order to take make this step. It seems he took to the monk's life well but there was one thing about him that the other monks found strange. He used to wander through the forest and every now and then let utter an exclamation: "Oh joy! Oh joy!" Bhaddiya's companions

informed the Buddha about this odd behaviour and he asked that Bhaddiya come and see him, which he did. The Buddha asked him why he let out this cry as he wandered through the forest and his answer is both interesting and instructive. "Lord, when I was chief, I lived with constant worry, anxiety, fear and uncertainty, despite having security guards inside and outside my residence. But now that I own nothing and frequent lonely places in the forest I am untroubled, assured, without fear and confident and that is why I utter the cry oh joy, oh joy!" This delightful story encapsulates the contrast between the life of politics and that of monks, or at least what the monk's life was meant to be. Bhaddiya's comments about needing guards suggest that Sakyan politics could sometimes get nasty, even dangerous.

Nastiness and danger in politics is of course is not always the case, but even in stable democracies politics is about the exercise of power which always entails displeasing some people, making compromises, being challenged, frustrated, criticized, tempted, and sometimes betraying ideals or friends in order to get things done. In unstable democracies it can get very nasty indeed. This is not to say that public service cannot be rewarding and when successful give a sense of achievement, but even then it comes at the price of these other problems. When someone chooses to become a monk it is, or is supposed to be, letting go of worldly entanglements so that one can focus all one's attention and efforts on learning the Dhamma and freeing the mind. Further, monks are supposed to be exemplars for others – role models of

how to behave - polite when others are rude, calm when things are chaotic, letting go when everyone else is scrambling to get. As part of the vow a monk makes during his ordination he says: "For the overcoming of *dukkha*, for the attaining of Nirvana..." That is the purpose and goal of the monk's life, that's what Bhaddiya did, and that's why he soon attained Nirvana. The Buddha once said that becoming a monk is like pulling oneself out of a cesspit, and that a monk who gets involved in worldly concerns is like someone who, after pulling himself out of a cesspit and washing himself, jumps back into the filth.

Like us, the Buddha lived in a world where politics had a profound influence on all aspects of life. So what was the Buddha's attitude to politics? Shortly after he renounced the world he was walking through the streets of Rajagaha when King Bimbisara saw him and was deeply impressed by his poise and serene demeanour. He asked Gotama who he was and where he was from and then offered him a place in his court if he gave up being a monk. Gotama politely refused but said that if and when he discovered the Truth he would come back and see the king. And so he did. But when the two men met again the Buddha did not advise Bimbisara on what policies he should enact. Years later, the Buddha met Bimbisara's successor and son, Ajatasatthu, who had seized power by murdering his father, a scenario of the type not unknown even today in some parts of the world. The Buddha avoided saying anything one way or another about this to the king – a judicious move on his part. This is

not to say that the Buddha approved of what the king had done, but that was for others to deal with, it was not the Buddha's role.

I recall some 15 years ago when Myanmar's military rulers violently suppressed a pro-democracy demonstration. The next day some 500 monks silently and in an orderly manner, walked through the streets of Yangon. Without saying a word, without any gestures or banners, they made their disapproval plain. It showed great wisdom and dignity on their part. The Buddha made several rules specifically to keep monks from involvement in politics or anything related to it. A monk should not attend a military parade or function. It is an offence for a monk even to enter the royal palace. In order not to be at odds with the powers that be, monks must bow to any demands the king makes and the Vinaya rules changed should the king require it. For the same reason, anyone in the king's service must seek royal permission to resign and only when it is given can he become a monk.

The Buddha was on very good terms with King Pasadeni and there are some 50 discourses between the two, on a wide variety of subjects, but in none of them did the Buddha bring up any political matters. He steered clear of politics and certainly wanted his monks and nuns to do the same. Now it could be argued that things have changed in the 2500 years since the Buddha and that the Sangha should change accordingly. That is a valid argument, but it begs the question of how far and in what way should the monk's role change. For centuries monks have been poets, physicians, painters, teachers, astrologers, social workers, etc., all of



which are against specific Vinaya rules and at odds with the spirit of others. But most of these roles can be directly linked to the Dhamma in one way or another. For example, a poem can arouse devotion to be the Buddha, some social work can be an expression of *metta* and *karuna*. Further, one who does such things can easily maintain a calm mind and dignified presence while doing them, and one is unlikely to arouse enmity or make enemies. Publicly taking a political position is almost certain to attract hostility.

In Sri Lanka for over a century and in Burma in the last decades there have been monks who say that as citizens they have a duty to “protect the nation”, an undertaking that most certainly would entangle them in politics, quite likely tumultuous politics. The problem here is that the line between patriotism and jingoism is a fine one and it is very easy to slip from one into another, and jingoism is one of the ugliest manifestations of politics. There are other objections to monks in politics. Why take six years studying to be a dentist and then spend all your time practicing mechanics? Why choose to become a taxi driver and then pose as an expert in flower arranging and start advising florists how to do their job? Why join a club which has specific rules which you are fully aware of, and then join that club and refuse to follow its rules? What is the point of becoming a monk, whose role, behaviour and life-goal are clearly explained by the Buddha, and then get involved in politics?