

Buddhist Political Philosophy

Through inner peace, genuine world peace can be achieved. In this the importance of individual responsibility is quite clear; an atmosphere of peace must first be created within ourselves, then gradually expanded to include our families, our communities, and ultimately the whole planet.

–Tenzin Gyatso, the 14th Dalai Lama¹

From *Digha-nikāya*, 5²

The Tale of King Mahāvijita

10. Brahmin, once upon a time there was a king called Mahāvijita. He was rich, of great wealth and resources, with an abundance of gold and silver, of possessions and requisites, of money and money's worth, with a full treasury and granary. And when King Mahāvijita was reflecting in private, the thought came to him: "I have acquired extensive wealth in human terms, I occupy a wide extent of land which I have conquered. Let me now make a great sacrifice that would be to my benefit and happiness for a long time." And calling his chaplain (*Purohita*), he told him his thought. "I want to make a great sacrifice. Instruct me, venerable sir, how this may be to my lasting benefit and happiness."

11. The chaplain replied: "Your Majesty's country is beset by thieves. It is ravaged; villages and towns are being destroyed; the countryside is infested with brigands. If Your Majesty were to tax this region, that would be the wrong thing to do. Suppose Your Majesty were to think: 'I will get rid of this plague of robbers by executions and imprisonment, or by confiscation, threats, and banishment,' the plague would not be properly ended. Those who survived would later harm Your Majesty's realm.

"Yet with this plan you can completely eliminate the plague. To those in the kingdom who are engaged in cultivating crops and raising cattle, let Your Majesty distribute grain and fodder; to those in trade, give capital; to those in government service assign proper living wages. Then those people, being intent on their own occupations, will not harm the kingdom. Your Majesty's revenues will be great; the land will be tranquil and not beset by thieves; and the people, with joy in their hearts, playing with their children, will dwell in open houses."

And saying: "So be it!" the king accepted the chaplain's advice: he gave grain and fodder to those engaged in cultivating crops and raising cattle, capital to those in trade, proper living wages to those in government service. Then those people, being intent on their own

¹ There is unclarity in the West about the title of 'Dalai Lama'. In the first place, it denotes the spiritual leader of the Tibetan people (often by implication, a leader in the quest for Tibetan independence from China). The Dalai Lama is also seen as an incarnation of the bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara, according to the Gelug School of Tibetan Buddhism (a part of Vajrayāna Buddhism). But the Dalai Lama is not the official head of the Gelug School, nor of Tibetan Buddhism more broadly.

² Bhikkhu Bodhi (2005). *In the Buddha's Words: An Anthology of Discourses from the Pāli Canon*. Wisdom Publications. As far as I can tell, this is the *only* passage in the entire Pāli Canon that directly advocates any specific type of public policy.

occupations, did not harm the kingdom. The king's revenues became great; the land was tranquil and not beset by thieves; and the people, with joy in their hearts, playing with their children, dwelled in open houses.