Anathapindika Upasaka: A Model Leadership in Buddhism

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Abstract

This research is focused upon the leadership of Anathapindika Upasaka, one of the main disciples of Gautama Buddha. Anathapindika is considered to be the chief layman devotee of Buddha and became famous not only from his kindness and generosity, but also from his leadership. The Tipitaka devotes 22 Suttas and 15 Jatakas on his life, indicating that he is one of the most important figures in Buddhism, and worth thorough study. The findings of this qualitative research documentary analysis were as follows: Model leadership Anathapindika includes intelligence, ability to motivate others, loving kindness, setting a good example, creativity, and fairness. His success in life can be divided into two parts: 1) his success in personal development, during which he keeps on developing himself and training himself to be a better person, continuously, until he reached the spiritual status as Sotapanna, the first stage of Nibbana, and 2) his success in contributing to society, in which he helped to build the Jeta’s Grove Monastery, developed his home town, and brought in Buddha and Buddhism to Savatthi, one of the most important cities in Buddhism. Before his death Anathapindika became aware that he wanted other lay people to have an opportunity to listen to the deep Dhamma or the teachings of Buddha. Anathapindika’s life and works reflect strong leadership skills. Present day Buddhist leaders should reflect upon the details of Anathapindiaka’s life, especially how he managed to achieve success on both personal and social life planes—both successes depending deeply on Buddhism’s moral grounds.

Keywords: Leader; Leadership; Buddhism

1. Introduction

Many people nowadays are interested in leadership, judging from the best-selling books all over the shelves in bookstores in Thailand. Books on paraphrased topics like ‘to be a leader’, ‘how to lead’, and ‘leadership in the new millennium’ have become highly sought-after by readers. Most books of this kind were translated and
published in America and UK. Given this Western perspective, it is no surprise that there are very few books mentioning leadership from the Buddhist perspective, possibly because people think it is an outdated religion, thus its ideas may hold little value for most modern readers. Moreover, even if they are interested, they do not know where to find such materials. Most books about Buddhism do not specifically point out ‘Buddhist leadership’. Hence, this paper will aim to highlight the topic and help to expand the value and knowledge of Buddhist leadership for the wider public.

Leadership in the Buddhist sense has various perspectives from which to look, as Buddha himself has preached a lot on this topic to country and community leaders throughout his life time. Stories about leadership appeared in many Buddha’s stories all over the Tipitaka. However, after a review of ‘leaders’ of Buddhism, the name of Anathapindika came to the fore due to the fact that his life and his works are proof of a model leadership that became the further subject for study in this paper due to its potential to guide young and old alike into a better life.

This research used qualitative methodology by analyzing documents of Buddhist scriptures and other texts related to ‘leadership’. Area of study covered only the content regarding the leadership and personality traits of Anathapindika, the great benefactor of Buddhism during Buddha’s time. Main texts for this research were the 22 suttas and 15 Jatakas in the Buddhist Canon.

2. Leader and Leadership
2.1 Leader

Buddha’s wording in Rajovadha Jataka has explained ‘leadership’ in an interesting way:

“When all the cows swim across the river and their leader goes the wrong way; all cows will go in the wrong way. Similar to human being, if a man was made the leader and he does wrong, the people will all do wrong. If the king does not stay in righteousness, the country will suffer. When all the cows swim across the river and their leader goes in the right way, all cows will go in the right way. Similar to human being, if a man was made the leader and he does right, the people will do right. If the king stays in righteousness, the country will be in peace.” This statement was taken from the main scriptural body of Buddhism the Tipitaka Canon. In this paper, most references are from the Thai version translated from Pali language by scholars of Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalaya University. The Canon contains 45 books; hence the
book number was mentioned here to make it easier for further study (Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalaya University, 1996) from Tipitaka Book number 27, p.184).

Buddha pointed to the fact that a leader, both animal and human, is creating a pathway for the future for his followers. He or she will have high influence in leading his group towards destruction or success.

Witayaudom (2007, p.3) defined the meaning of a ‘leader’ as a person who is accepted or appointed to be the leader by a group of people, due to appropriate characteristics in a given situation. Those characteristics can be the bravery, knowledge, skills, and intelligence. However, this leader may possess or not possess ‘leadership’.

PhraDhammapidok (Payutto, 2002, p.3) explained that a ‘leader’ is a person who can coordinate and combine all people, so that they might live together or work together, towards a righteous and truthful destiny.

2.2 Leadership

Generally speaking, leadership encompasses various characteristics that help a person to manage other people. A leader can exercise his duty through ‘authority’ and ‘power’ as the tools. Such a person can build influence over supporters so they respect and accept his or her authority. After building trust among followers, leadership’s success can be obtained through leveraging knowledge, capacity, creativity, decision-making, etc., in order to reach group or organizational targets with proficiency and effectiveness.

More specifically however, a leader is sometimes appointed to the highest position and therefore not accepted by his followers. We may say that such people lack leadership. On the other side of this coin, some people might not have a formal position of leadership, but are well-accepted and respected by other group members, who are willing to follow this person’s guidance and advice. This is reflected in the expression that, ‘some leaders might not have leadership; some people with leadership might not become a leader’ (Witayaudom, 2007, p.3).
Webster (1913) defined the meaning of ‘leadership’ as the quality of character and personality giving a person the ability to gain the confidence to lead others.

Worakawin (2001, p.132) summarized the leadership of a good leader into 9 attributes: 1) having higher intelligence than others in the team; 2) motivating others to follow and reach the group’s target; 3) making sharp decisions; 4) having strong interpersonal relationships; 5) having integrity as an example for others; 6) having stamina in all situations, especially criticism and work-related mistakes; 7) becoming a medium to unite society; 8) being highly creative; and 9) exercising fairness to all members without prejudice.

The Ancient Greeks found four ideal leaderships for their leaders, which are: 1) justice and judgment; 2) wisdom and counsel; 3) shrewdness and cunning; and 4) valor and action (Dechthai, 2001, p.10).

In 1940, Charles Bird studied leadership traits and summarized them into 79 characteristics, which he categorized into 4 groups: 1) intelligence; 2) initiative; 3) sense of humor; and 4) extroversion.

In Summary, a ‘leader’ can be a person who is appointed to or who earns a position to lead a group of people toward achieving the group’s goals. Meanwhile, ‘leadership’ characteristics emanate from inside the ‘leader’, the power of which will generate respect from and build faith among group members. An appointed leader, however, might not possess leadership traits, and those who are pressed into leadership might not have an official position.

3. Anathapindika Upasaka in Buddhist Tipitaka

The story of Anathapindika Upasaka (Upasaka is an official term for a Buddhist who has vowed to follow Buddha, his Teaching, and the Order. The Dhamma of Upasaka contains 5 items: 1) faith; 2) observing the precepts; 3) believe in karma; 4) do not seek refuge outside this teaching; and 5) give first support to this religion (Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalaya University, 1996) from Tipitaka Book number 22, p.209, appears in many places in the Buddhist Canon Tipitaka and also in its commentaries. The direct teaching from Buddha to Anathapindika himself appeared in 19 suttas (the discourses of Buddha) and from Buddha’s disciples to
Anathapindika in another 3 suttas. There are also 15 more connected stories found in the Jatakas (Jataka contains 550 stories, which Gautama Buddha taught by relating his teaching at the time to his previous births, of both as in human and animal forms), (Suthon, 2000, p.5). By name, the suttas include Suddhattasutta, Anathapindikovadasutta, Thakkhinaiyapukkalasutta, Velamasutta, Kingdhidhikasutta, Arakkhitasutta, Payapannasutta, Kihisamijisutta, Pattakammasutta, Ananyasutta, Athiyasutta, Ittasutta, Verasutta, Pitisutta, Pathamaverasutta, Panjaverapayasutta, Kampilokisutta, Pariyasutta, Kihisutta, Pathamaanathapindikasutta, Thutiyaanathapindikasutta and Anathapindikovadhasutta. The 15 Jatakas include Kathirangkajataka, Agatanyujataka, Verijataka, Visaihajataka, Sirikalakannijataka, Apannakajataka, Rohinijataka, Varunitusakajataka, Punnapatijataka, Kalakannijataka, Kusanalijataka, Sirijataka, Patarakatapetakajataka, Hirijataka, and Sulasajataka.

The documentary analysis herein revealed the fact that Anathapindika uniquely possessed leadership in the Buddhist style, and thus his life and achievements are worth sharing.

4. Brief Story of Anathapindika

Anathapindika was born in Savatthi, the capital of Kosala, in the north of India during the period of Gautama Buddha (around 500 BC). His father was a merchant named Sumana. When he was born, Anathapindika was named Sudhatta which means ‘the person who gives’. He was married to Punyalakkhanadevi and together they had 3 daughters named Mahasuphatta, Chulasuphatta, and Sumanadevi, and one only son, Kala. Anathapindika loved giving donation to the poor so the villagers called him ‘Anathapindika’ which means ‘the one giving food for the needy’. He first met Buddha when he traded his merchandise at Rajagaha and became Sotapanna: There are four levels of spiritual progress in Buddhism. From the highest to last: Arahanta: the worthy one, Anagami: non-returner, Sakadagami: once-returner, Sotapanna: stream enterer. One becomes Sotapanna after detached oneself from ‘self’, doubts, and rituals (Payutto, 2008, p.128), the first spiritual stage in Buddhism. When he came back to Savatthi, he built Jeta’s Grove Monastery, on which he spent 54 Kotikahapana for this purpose (Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalaya University, 1996) from Tipitaka Book number 3, p.152. He gave food to monks every day until Buddha named him the ‘foremost disciple in generosity’ from Tipitaka Book number 20, p.31-32). He regularly observed the five holy precepts (abstain from taking lives, stealing,
sexual misconduct, lying, and drinking intoxicants) and this prompted his wife and
children to follow. In fact, he donated so much, that he himself became poor. One
devata (translated as an ‘angel’) who was living in his house suggested him to stop his
donations, immediately he expelled the devata who later apologized and was accepted
back again. Anathapindika brought that devata to meet Buddha who spoke thus: “The
fool would see only the growth as long as the evil deeds do not yield the result.
When the evil deeds yielded the result, the fool would see the evil deeds. At the same
time, the wise would see only the evil as long as the good deeds do not yield the
result. When the good deed, yield the result the wise would see the growth”
(Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalaya University, 1996) from Tipitaka Book number 25, p.26-27.

One day, his granddaughter dropped and broke her clay doll and cried ceaselessly. With love towards her, Anathapindika invited Buddha and his monks to
make merit to that ‘dead’ clay doll. Buddha said: “One should not cry, lament or
suffer because it is not beneficial to those who died. Those who were dead still
remain dead. The alms you gave to monks will be beneficial to those who died”.

Kala, the only son of Anathapindika, did not like religion. Anathapindika
used a strategy to lure his son to the temple. He paid his son to go and listen to
Buddha’s teachings, from 100 Kahapana until 1,000 Kahapana per day until his son
was enlightened by the Dhamma.

Anathapindika was kind to his friends and those who surrounded him. Here
are some examples. One of his slaves named Rohini accidentally killed her mother. He
kindly helped her to cremate the dead lady (from Tipitaka Book number 27, p.17). In
another incident, another slave named Punna volunteered to bring back Buddha who
had been travelling far, and for a long time. Punna successfully convinced Buddha to
come back to Savatthi. Anathapindika rewarded her by releasing her from servitude.
Punna later became a nun in Buddhism (from Tipitaka Book number 23, p.63-67). In
another vignette, Anathapindika brought 500 of his friends to listen to Buddha’s
Dhamma, which resulted in their adherence to Buddhism (from Tipitaka Book number
3, p.154-170). Anathapindika once initiated the planting of Bodhi tree in Jeta’s Grove
Monastery in order to remind the believers of Buddha’s enlightenment. The seed of
the tree was said to be brought from Bodhagaya from the same tree where Buddha sat
and reached enlightenment (Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalaya University, 1996) from
Tipitaka Book number 3, p.267-279.
Anathapindikovada Sutta (Tipitaka Book 3, 1996, p.433-441), it mentioned the death of Anathapindika in his house. On that day, he asked his servant to invite Venerable Sariputta and Venerable Ananda, the two chief disciples of Buddha, to see him. The monks gave a sermon about the detachment of all things. After the sermon, Anathapindika said he never heard such sermon before so he asked the monks to preach this sermon for other laymen as well. After his death, his spirit was reborn as an angel in Dusita heaven. One day, the angel came to meet Buddha and said: "O blessed is this Jeta Grove, frequented by the holy Order, where the Dhamma King resides, the fount of all my happiness. By deeds, by knowledge, by righteousness, by virtue, by the sublimest life, by these are mortals purified, and not by lineage nor by wealth. A wise man, therefore, seeing his own good, wisely will choose the Dhamma, that he may thus be purified. Like Sariputta in his wisdom, in his virtue, and in highest peace, at best a bhikkhu who has gone across, can only equal him" (Hecker, 2013; Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalaya University, 1996) from Tipitaka Book 15, p.70-71.

5. Analysis of Anathapindika’s Leadership

Anathapindika’s life has reflected many leadership characteristics worth looking into. The 8 most important points that best explain the leadership of Anathapindika is found in this analysis, including (Figure 1):

1) Intelligence: Many of his actions showed that Anathapindika was intelligent. For example, he was successful in business; he could comfortably debate with others about Buddha’s teaching; he understood the Dhamma and reached the Sotapanna spiritual level in relatively short period after beginning his studies with Buddha.

2) Motivation: Anathapindika could easily motivate others to follow his advice. For example, he encouraged the villagers living between Rajagaha and Savatthi to help build shelters for Buddha and his monks every one Yojana (13 km) in his home province. He successfully encouraged his friends to believe in Buddha. He used money as a strategy to lure his only son, Kala, to visit Buddha and later believed in Buddhism.
3) Loving kindness: There are many occasions explaining Anathapindika’s loving-kindness for others. For example, he sponsored the cremation of his slave’s mother; he showed his compassion for his new servant who did not eat on the Holy Day; he always gave alms of food, medicine, and other items to monks and novices; he cared for his granddaughter’s sorrowfulness after she broke her clay doll.

4) Modeling: Anathapindika searched for Buddha and received the Dhamma into his heart. After that he spent his life time protecting the religion. He always observed the Five Holy Precepts and fasted on the Holy Day. His wife, children, servants, and slaves saw his example and followed him.

5) Creativity: When he initiated the merit-making for the dead ‘clay doll’ of his grandchild, he set an example for other Buddhists to follow by making merits
for the dead relatives. Other examples include his idea of planting a Bodhi tree as the symbol of Buddha, which continues to be a practice even today and his initiation of the idea of monk’s preaching deep Dhamma principles to laymen, not only just other holy men.

6) Fairness: Anathapindika was always invited to be a middleman or a judge in reconciling two rival groups. For example, he was one of the judges to examine a pregnant Bhikkhuni (Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalaya University, 1996) from Tipitaka Book 1, p.203-206; and he helped encourage others to treat fighting monks from Kosampi fairly.

7) Uniting Society: The faith Anathapindika had in Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Order enabled him to encourage others to support Buddhism. He built Jeta’s Grove Monastery with his personal wealth and the temple became the heart of society. Buddha spent 19 rainy retreats in this temple, the longest compared to other places in his life.

8) Principle-centered: Anathapindika had high ideology in Buddhism. His faith never wavered even after his wealth decreased a lot from his generous donations. He once expelled an angel from his house after the angel suggested him to stop giving alms. He continued giving donations without fearing anything because of his strong faith in the religion.

6. Buddha Dhamma of Leadership in Anathapindika

There are many sets of Dhamma related to leadership that Buddha taught country and community leaders during his life time. When looking at the life of Anathapindika, it was found that there are several sets of Dhamma matching his leadership. These Dhamma helped him shine and succeed in setting a good example for other Buddhist leaders even up to the present. Here’s the summarized 4 sets of Dhamma found most significant to Anathapindika (Figure 2):

a) Rajadhamma or the virtues of the king or a leader. It is comprised of 10 virtues practiced every day: 1) Dana or charity: Anathapindika sacrificed his own pleasure for the well-being of the public by giving away his belongings and food to support others, including giving knowledge and serving the public; 2) Sila or high moral character; he set a good example for controlling his body, speech, and heart in righteousness; 3) Pariccaga or self-sacrifice; he was generous, avoided selfishness, and practiced
altruism; 4) Ājjava or honesty; Anathapindika was honest and sincere towards other people, performing his duties with loyalty and sincerity toward others and the religion; 5) Maddavaor gentleness: he had a gentle temperament, avoiding arrogance, and never defaming others; 6) Tapa or self-controlling; Anathapindika was calm in many difficult situations, performing his duties without indolence; 7) Akkodha or non-anger; he was free from hatred and remains calm in the midst of confusion. This is the reason why Anathapindika was always invited to be a judge for his city; 8) Avihimsa or non-violence; he exercised non-violence, and he was not vengeful; 9) Khanti or for bearance; Anathapindika practiced patience and trembling to serve public interests; and 10) Avirodhana or uprightness; he respected the opinions of others without prejudice. Notwithstanding the above, Anathapindika also tried to promote public peace and order (Payutto, 2008, p. 240-241).

Figure 2 Dhamma of Anathapindika

b) Sappurisadhamma or the qualities of a gentleman. It comprises of 7 virtues making Anathapindika a righteous man who always thinks carefully before taking any actions in life: 1) Dhammannuta or knowing the cause; 2) Atthannuta or knowing the purpose; 3) Attannuta or knowing oneself; 4) Mattannuta or knowing how to be
temperate; 5) *Kalanutta* or knowing the proper time; 6) *Parisannuta* or knowing the society; and 7) *Puggalannuta* or knowing the different individuals.

c) **Disa** or the directions a good man should keep reflecting upon. It contains 6 items: 1) *Purathimadisa* or parents as the east; 2) *Dakkinadisa* or teachers in the right; 3) *Pachimadisa* or wife and children as the direction behind; 4) *Uttaradisa* or friends and companions as the direction in the left; 5) *Hettimadisa* or servants and workmen as the nadir; and 6) *Uparimadisa* or monks as the zenith. Anathapindika was known to take care of these six groups of people very well and these people then helped him in return when he needed something to serve the public. All good leaders in the history should consider these six directions at all times.

d) **Brahmavihara** or the holy shelter for all good leaders. This is known as the Dhamma or qualities of the God Brahman. It comprises 4 virtues: 1) *Metta* or loving-kindness or friendliness; 2) *Karuna* or compassion, when others are in pain; 3) *Mudita* or sympathetic joy, when others are happy; and 4) *Upekkha* or equanimity of mind, when one has finished all works to serve others.

The Buddhists would keep remembering some kinds of Dhamma topics like these in their mind, so they will ponder upon them from time to time to remind themselves of their own daily actions. If any of the Dhamma is not found in oneself, one should be hurry to instill that Dhamma in their heart and action. (Payutto, 2008, p.124)

**7. Develop self before serving others**

Similar to other Buddhists or even Buddha himself, Anathapindika had first struggled to instill good qualities in him before he looked outside and helped the public. He succeeded in actualizing himself and also succeeded in developing society. Through analyzing Anathapindika’s success in developing himself, it was found that: 1) He kept looking for a spiritual master all in life and eventually found Buddha in Rajagaha city; 2) He sought out the Dhamma or the teaching of Buddha and realized the truth about life’s purpose and was able to reach the spiritual stage of *Sotapanna*; 3) Since he was born in a merchant family, he was known to have high skills in trading and to have built up his wealth from this expertise; 4) His inner strength of, for example, patience, perseverance, compassion, and forgiveness helped him to be a good gentleman; 5) He held high moral principles in life, especially always observing...
the Five Holy Precepts, which Buddha said is the foundation to make one a real human being; 6) He set a clear goal and is not detoured by any changes. This was seen from his determination to build the magnificent Jeta’s Grove Monastery, which remains an important spiritual place for Buddhism, 2,500 years later; 7) He keeps developing himself until the last minute of life, by listening to Buddha’s teaching on a daily basis; and 8) Anathapindika gave to the needy and priests all the time until he was given the name Anathapindika which means ‘the one with rice for the poor’.

Regarding Anathapindika’s success in public life, it was found that: 1) He successfully encouraged villagers to build shelters between two important cities, Rajagaha and Savatthi; 2) He built the Jeta’s Grove Monastery, which became the center for Buddha to preach Buddhism to the world; Buddha resided in this place for 19 rainy retreats, the longest period of all such places; 3) He was just and exercised fairness and that’s why he was always invited to be a judge for any disputes in his community; 4) His business skills brought economic superiority to his city Savatthi, hence raising local economic standards; 5) He initiated the idea of planting the Bodhi tree as a symbol of Buddha; People would worship the tree when they missed Buddha; 6) Even before his death, he thought of the public interest, by asking the monks to preach deep Dhamma to them; and 7) By inviting Buddha to visit Savatthi and reside there, Anathapindika exposed his society and people to the most important asset of their time. In short, we may summarize Anathapindika’s personal success and public success with this figure 3, which shows that he achieved his personal victory before the public victory:

![Figure 3 Anathapindika’s Personal and Public Success](image)

8. Conclusion

Anathapindika is known among Buddhists as a Sotapanna, which makes him almost perfect in the spiritual progress of Buddhism. He became a model leader both his thinking and action. The development from within the heart to the serving of the public makes others follow this example until today. The leadership traits found in
Anathapindika are not only found on his physical body, but are judged from his strong character, the Dhamma he is holding and his moral thought. All these traits combined lead him to give alms, listen to the Dhamma from Buddha, and persevere to develop wisdom and spirituality. Anathapindika maintained strong faith in Buddha, Dhamma, and Order, creating strong principles in his life which have served as an example to other Buddhists, from that day to this. From a different perspective, the concept of developing oneself first from within the heart made Anathapindika into a good and gentlemanly leader. The success of helping the public all his life time is totally related to religion. The most significant legacy in his lifetime is the building of Jeta’s Grove Monastery, which becomes the center of Buddhism. Countless of Buddha’s suttas were preached from this temple. Anathapindika’s life is the ideal life of all Buddhists in past and present.

Thus, ideal Buddhist leaders should develop themselves first before serving the public (Figure 4). Similarly, Buddha said: “*The wise should have morality first, and teach others later. By this, there will be no tarnishment*” (Buddharakkhita, 2013).
References


