The Ideal of the Bodhisattva King in Sri Lanka and the Reform of the Sangha

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1. <Introduction> The legitimacy of the kingship in Sri Lanka, where Buddhism was introduced by the conversion of a king, was acknowledged by the role of the king as a promoter and a protector of Buddhism. As the qualities of an ideal Buddhist king were gradually spread through the society, the concept of a king as a bodhisattva came to be applied to political ideology, and the king's authority was so much strengthened that kings in the island not only purified the Buddhist sangha but also carried out ecclesiastical responsibilities. This article, based on historical materials in the Pāli chronicles and epigraphic sources, gives a historical overview of this process from the Anurādhapura to the Polonnaruva period.

2. <The Anurādhapura Period> According to the Pāli chronicles, Buddhism was officially introduced into Sri Lanka in the 3rd century BCE by a son of the Indian Emperor Asoka, Mahinda, who converted King Devānampiyātissa (250-210 B.C.) to Buddhism. Buddhism thereafter became the national faith of the island. The Buddhist community had its headquarters at Mahāvihāra, and it developed and spread all through the island under the control of the single school of Mahāvihāra. However, the first secession, that of the Abhayagiri vihāra, from the Mahāvihāra school occurred in the reign of Vaṭṭagāmaṇi Abhaya (89-77 B.C.) Then a faction which left the Abhayagiri school in the reign of Goṭṭābhaya (253-266 A.D.) also formed an independent school at Jetavana, which was built by King Mahāsena (276-303 A.D.) These three schools, i.e., Mahāvihāra, Abhayagiri, and Jetavana, existed independently of one another until King Parakkamabāhu I (1153-1186 A.D.) united them into one in the Polonnaruva period.

Buddhist kings were called bodhisattva only after a new sect of Buddhism known as Vetulyavāda appeared in Sri Lanka during the reign of Vohārikatissa (214-236 A.D.) The title of mahāsatta, compassionate to all beings, was given to King
Sirisāṅhabodhi (251-253 A.D.) He was considered to be a paragon of virtue and a zealous patron of the faith who led a life of piety and practiced the ten royal virtues. He, in fact, became the ideal model of a king in Sri Lanka that endured for generations after him. According to the Pāli chronicles, kings thereafter were sometimes referred to by his name, i.e., Sirisaṅhabodhi, in the chronicles and epigraphs, thus crediting them with the same virtues. Buddhadasā (340-368 A.D.) is said to have led the life of a bodhisattva. Upatissa I (368-410 A.D.) was credited with having practiced the ten pāramītas. Aggabodhi I (575-608 A.D.) aspired to the attainment of the highest enlightenment, and Sena I (833-853 A.D.) to Buddhahood.

In the early Anurādhapura period, some kings who extended special favors to the Abhayagiri school were involved in some kind of the bodhisattva cult. However, in the middle of the Anurādhapura period, the bodhisattva cult was well recognized as an ideological factor of kingship, implying that a king should have a moral responsibility for the country and inducing him to lead the exemplary life of a bodhisattva, regardless of which monastic schools he favored.

After the late Anurādhapura period, the legitimacy of the kingship came to be founded on the claim of a king being a blood relative of the Buddha. No evidence of a king actually claiming to be a descendant of the Śākya clan is found before the tenth century, when the claim occurred for the first time in an inscription in the reign of Kassapa V (914-923 A.D.), who was one of the most prominent scholars of his time. This claim also occurs in a stereotyped manner in the epigraphic records of his successors, Dappula IV (924-935 A.D.),10 Mahinda IV (956-972 A.D.),11 and Mahinda V (982-1029 A.D).12 This trend can be traced back to the eighth century, when originally ecclesiastical terms like vat-himi, which were used in reference only to the saṅgha in earlier times, came to be applied to kings as well. In addition, an attempt to elevate the position of the king to a stature equal to the highest ranks of the Buddhist order, namely, that of the Buddha, bodhisattva, or arhat, is evident in the use of the term pirinivan in reference to the demise of kings, namely, a term associated with the Buddha and arhats.

The description of a king as a bodhisattva and the claim that he was actually kin to the Buddha indicate that the king, by the tenth century, came to be virtually recognized as the head of the Buddhist church, on both symbolical and political lev-
els. They enhanced the authority of a king over the saṅgha so he could, and did, intervene to settle disputes, set up regulations for the administration of monasteries, and initiate purifications through disciplinary measures. Such interventions were effected by several kings, some of which in the late Anurādhapura period were inscribed in epigraphic records as Vihāra Katikāvata, collections of rules for the recluses in the temples. The Vihāra Katikāvata served as a role model for the Sāsana Katikāvata, promulgated after the Polonnaruva period, which was rigidly enforced on every recluse in Sri Lanka.

3. <The Polonnaruva Period> After the Polonnaruva period, some kings were sometimes described as being a Cakkavattin, although this term never used about a king during the whole period of the Anurādhapura kingdom. Jayabāhu I (1110-1111 A.D.), Gajabāhu II (1132-1153 A.D.), Parakkamabāhu I (1153-1186 A.D.), Nissaṅkamalla (1187-1196 A.D.), and Lokissara (1210-1211 A.D.) are entitled Cakkavattin in some chronicles and inscriptions. The northern parts of Sri Lanka fell into the power of the South Indian kingdom Colas in 1017 and remained a subject state until 1070, when Vijayabāhu I (1055-1110 A.D.) defeated the Colas and became the king of Sri Lanka. He resided at Polonnaruva, which he made the capital of his kingdom. The fact that the title Cakkavattin referring to him and to other warrior kings is used in the chronicles in the context of describing their frequent conflicts with rival claimants suggests that the title does not necessarily mean “a rule by non-violence,” as the Pāli canon would suggest. In addition, given that the expression Cakravartti(kal) as a royal title appears in the Tamil inscriptions of South India earlier than in the Sinhalese in Sri Lanka in the Polonnaruva period, and that the title of Cakravartti(kal) had come into vogue in the Cola kingdom earlier than in Sri Lanka, the use of the term Cakkavattin for kings in the Polonnaruva period in Sri Lanka was probably a borrowing from the Cola practice.

Another departure from tradition in terms of Sinhalese royalty in this period was apparent in respect to personal names. Kings in the Anurādhapura period mostly had the names closely associated with the Buddhist tradition, such as Buddhāsa, Upatissa, Agghabodhi, Saṅghatissa, Moggallāna, Mahinda, and Kassapa, whereas in the Polonnaruva period, none of the kings had a name of special Buddhist significance. Vijayabāhu, Jayabāhu, Vikkamabāhu, Vīrabāhu,
Gajabahu, Parakkamabahu, and Nissaŋkamalla are all names which are associated with heroic qualities.

However, the concept of the bodhisattva king still remained a living tradition at this time, as is shown in the names of some kings in the Polonnaruva period who are described as Sirisanghabhodhi, meaning an ideal king, such as Vijayabahu I, Parakkamabahu I, Nissaŋkamalla, Sāhasamalla (1200-1202 A.D.), and Lokissara. Vijayabhahu II (1186-1187 A.D.) was literally called bodhisatta.

Parakkamabahu I was termed Cakkavattin as well as Sirisanghabodhi and regarded as being endowed with both heroic and bodhisattva characteristics. He gained absolute control of all regions and all social groups in the island, which had been in complete chaos after the demise of Vijayabahu I. Conscious of his supreme authority over the island, Parakkamabahu I decided to reunite the saṅgha under the leadership of the Mahavihāra school, a feat that no other king before him had ever been able to achieve. In addition, he issued the first Sāsana Katikāvata for all recluses. The greatest political contribution of this unification of the saṅgha was to institute the title of Mahāsāmi for the supreme hierarch of the saṅgha, through whom the king could control clerical affairs and exert his authority over the Buddhist order.

4. <Conclusion> As has been described, the bodhisattva cult as an ideology for kingship developed from the early Anurādhapura period. Regarding a king as a bodhisattva led to the identification of the king with the highest ranks of the Buddhist order and increased the legitimacy of his authority to rule over and unite it, as Parakkamabahu I did, in the Polonnaruva period.