

Leadership Qualities in the *Chakkavatti-Sihanada Sutta*: An Analysis

ANJU KHANAL

Lumbini Buddhist University, Central Campus, Lumbini, Nepal

• **Article History:** Submitted 23 February, 2025; Reviewed 30 March, 2025; Revised 10 April, 2025 • **Corresponding Author:** Anju Khanal
• **Email:** anjukhanal@lbu.edu.np

Abstract

The Chakkavatti-Sihanada Sutta outlines an exemplary model of ethical leadership founded on Buddhist principles. This article explores the sutta's teachings on leadership, emphasizing moral integrity, compassion, and the symbolic significance of the Wheel of Righteousness, and evaluates their applicability to modern political and corporate leadership. The ideal leader leads with mindfulness, justice, and virtue, prioritizing the welfare of all to establish peace, prosperity, and societal harmony. Its ethical framework highlights the necessity of leading by example, fostering justice, and prioritizing sustainable and long-term outcomes. Ethical governance serves as a paradigm for equitable decision-making that promotes social justice and sustainability. The text also warns against the repercussions of unethical leadership, such as social disarray and decline, and posits the eventual rise of a virtuous leader to restore balance. This article explores how contemporary leaders can adopt principles such as compassion, accountability, and justice to achieve sustainable development and societal well-being as emphasized in the sutta. And also scans the leadership principles described in the Chakkavatti-Sihanada Sutta, compares them to modern leadership theories, and explores their relevance to contemporary contexts.

Keywords: Ethical Leadership, Peace, Moral Integrity, Justice, Sustainability, Accountability

Introduction

Leadership has always played a central role in shaping human societies, with various cultures and traditions offering distinct perspectives on what defines an ideal leader. Within the Buddhist tradition, the *Chakkavatti-Sihanada Sutta* (DN 26) provides a detailed framework for leadership rooted in *Dhamma* (righteousness). It introduces the concept of the *chakkavatti*, or Wheel-turning Monarch, whose leadership embodies moral integrity, compassion, and a commitment to the collective welfare of society.

The *Chakkavatti-Sihanada Sutta* discusses a framework of ethical leadership centered on the figure of the Wheel-turning Monarch (*Chakkavatti Raja*). This leader's authority derives not from compulsion but from adherence to the *Dhamma*, ensuring societal harmony and prosperity. The Wheel of Righteousness symbolizes the leader's responsibility to uphold justice and promote the well-being of all (Davids 112).

Statement of the Problem

Leadership in both political and corporate spheres is increasingly being examined for ethical gaps, corruption, and self-serving behavior at present time. Unethical leadership has contributed to widespread war, conflict, distrust, social instability, economic inequality, and environmental degradation. The leadership model presented in the *Chakkavatti-Sihanada Sutta* offers a timeless framework for ethical governance, emphasizing moral integrity, justice, and the long-term consequences of leadership decisions. However, despite its historical and cultural context, the relevance of these ancient teachings in the modern world remains underexplored. This article aims to address this gap by examining the leadership model in the *Chakkavatti-Sihanada Sutta* and analyzing how its principles can be applied to contemporary leadership practices. Specifically, the study investigates how *dharmic* governance, ethical decision-making, and the cyclical nature of leadership can inform modern leaders in their pursuit of justice, prosperity, and sustainability. The problem lies in determining how to bridge the gap between ancient wisdom and modern leadership challenges.

Objectives

To analyze the leadership principles outlined in the *Chakkavatti-Sihanada Sutta*.

1. To explore the relevance of these principles in contemporary political and

corporate leadership.

2. To propose practical applications for ethical leadership based on Buddhist teachings.

Research Methodology

This research adopts a qualitative, analytical approach to study the *Chakkavatti-Sihanada Sutta*'s leadership model. The primary methodology involves a thorough textual analysis of the *sutta*, supplemented by existing scholarly interpretations and commentaries on Buddhist leadership principles. A comparative analysis is conducted to assess the relevance of the *sutta*'s teachings in the context of modern political and corporate leadership. Data from contemporary leadership theories, case studies, and ethical leadership models are integrated to highlight the practical applications of Buddhist principles. The study emphasizes critical analysis and synthesis of ancient wisdom with current leadership challenges.

The Concept of the *Chakkavatti*

The term *chakkavatti* refers to a universal ruler who governs with justice and righteousness, ensuring the prosperity and harmony of their province. In the *Chakkavatti-Sihanada Sutta*, a *chakkavatti* is depicted as a leader who maintains their rule with the principles of *Dhamma*, the moral framework that upholds both societal and cosmic order (Bajracharya 421).

The Buddha advised the monks to rely on themselves and the *Dhamma* as their refuge. A *bhikkhu* must practice morality, concentration, and wisdom to free himself from all defilements. One can attain purification by diligently following the *Dhamma*, reflecting on its truth, and not seeking external dependence. A person can gain lasting merit and the fruits of good *karma* through virtue, wisdom, and mindfulness. The Buddha emphasized self-confidence and the transformative power of practicing the *Dhamma* with dedication. (Walshe 395).

King Ddhanemi, the Wheel-Turning Monarch (Bajracharya 421)

Ddhanemi was a wise and just king. He possessed seven treasures, including a divine wheel, an elephant, a horse, a jewel, a woman, a householder, and an adviser. These treasures symbolize the special power of the king and ruling perspectives. Such as

- i. The Wheel-Treasure: A divine, golden wheel symbolizing righteous rule and conquest, enabling the monarch to travel swiftly and establish justice across the land.

- ii. The Elephant-Treasure: A majestic, white elephant representing strength and sovereignty, aiding in peaceful governance and protection of the realm.
- iii. The Horse-Treasure: A magnificent, swift horse symbolizing speed and efficiency, ensuring rapid communication and defense of the kingdom.
- iv. The Jewel-Treasure: A luminous gem signifying wisdom and prosperity, guiding the monarch in decision-making and attracting wealth.
- v. The Woman-Treasure: A virtuous and beautiful queen embodying grace and loyalty, supporting the monarch in governance and maintaining harmony.
- vi. The Householder-Treasure: A wise and wealthy steward managing the kingdom's resources, ensuring economic stability and prosperity for all subjects.
- vii. The Adviser-Treasure: A sagacious counselor offering strategic guidance, helping the monarch rule with wisdom and foresight.

Under his rule, people lived in peace and prosperity, and he conquered many lands without using force. As he aged, he passed the throne and the divine wheel to his son, advising him to rule wisely. His son ruled with the same virtue, and the divine wheel remained, showing that he was a rightful and just ruler for many thousands of years (Harvey 123).

When a righteous king rules, a divine wheel stays in place, symbolizing justice. If it shifts, it means the king must restore virtue or step down. The king seeing the wheel move, renounced his throne, became a monk, and attained enlightenment. He advised his son to seek the wheel and rule honestly. If a king ignores the wheel's shift and acts irrationally, it vanishes, leading to the kingdom's decline.

Decline and Rise of Human Age

According to Walshe,

People used to live long lives of 10,000 years, but as moral decline set in starting with failing to help the needy and increasing sexual misconduct lifespans and beauty decreased. Over time, harsh speech, greed, hatred, and false beliefs spread, reducing lifespans further to 500, 250, and eventually 100 years. Society became more corrupt, with incest, greed, and violence becoming common. The text predicts a future where lifespans drop to just 10 years, morality disappears, and people behave like animals, attacking each other in widespread violence. (400-2)

On the same context, Bajracharya further writes,

After seven days of chaos, survivors will resolve to live virtuously, starting by abstaining from killing. Gradually, lifespans and beauty will increase as people practice good deeds. Over generations, lifespans will grow to 20, 40, and eventually 80,000 years. Society will flourish, with prosperity, peace, and only three diseases: greed, fasting, and old age. A great city, Ketumati, will emerge, ruled by a righteous king, Sankha, who will maintain order and later renounce his throne to become a monk under the future Buddha, Metteyya. Metteyya Buddha

will teach the Dhamma, guiding many to enlightenment. (427-30)

Leadership Principles from *Chakkavatti-Sihanada Sutta*

This *sutta* stands practical even for today's leaders. A leader truly guided by the public welfare can see a lot in this *sutta*. Some of the principles that can be drawn from this *sutta* are:-

i. Ethical Leadership

The leadership framework described in the *Chakkavatti-Sihanada Sutta* is grounded in a strong moral foundation. The ideal ruler is expected to uphold high ethical standards, including adherence to the Five Precepts of Buddhism: refraining from killing, stealing, lying, sexual misconduct, and intoxication. By practicing these ethical principles, the ruler exemplifies virtuous behavior, setting a moral standard for their subjects. Leadership, according to this model, is not enforced through fear or coercion but through the ruler's integrity, which inspires others to emulate their conduct. As Walton notes, ethical leadership in Buddhist teachings is essential for fostering trust, respect, and societal stability (Walton 104). The principles of ethical leadership highlighted in the *Chakkavatti-Sihanada Sutta* serve as a reminder that genuine leadership is rooted in integrity, self-discipline, and prioritizing collective welfare over personal gain. By adopting these principles, modern leaders can restore community trust and stability.

ii. Spiritual Self-Reliance and the Refuge of *Dhamma*

The Buddha's advice to "be islands unto yourselves" highlights the importance of relying on oneself for spiritual growth. This teaching urges individuals to take responsibility for their spiritual path rather than depending on external factors. By observing the body, feelings, mind, and mental objects with mindfulness and clarity, people can let go of worldly distractions and achieve inner peace and freedom. The *Dhamma* acts as a guide in this journey, providing wisdom and direction. Through meditation and mindfulness, practitioners build resilience and understanding, helping them overcome life's struggles and move beyond suffering. This teaching shows the power of personal effort and the importance of turning to the *Dhamma* for spiritual advancement (Bodhi 78).

iii. Avoid Greed and Corruption

A great leader must resist greed, selfishness, and corruption, as these lead

to societal decay and instability. Excessive taxation and oppressive policies burden citizens, creating resentment and disorder. Instead, a ruler should prioritize fairness, ethical governance, and economic justice. By practicing generosity and ensuring equitable resource distribution, a leader fosters trust, stability, and long-term prosperity (*Digha Nikaya* 26).

iv. Seek Counsel from Wise Advisors

A just ruler does not make decisions in isolation but consults wise ministers and spiritual advisors. Knowledgeable counselors provide insights that help navigate complex governance challenges with wisdom and foresight. Seeking advice prevents reckless decisions and ensures policies align with ethical and moral values, ultimately benefiting the entire kingdom and promoting sustainable leadership (Bodhi 73).

v. Maintain Peace Without Violence

The *Chakkavatti-Sihanada Sutta* discourages rulers from using force to expand their power. A righteous leader gains the loyalty of the people through justice, compassion, and ethical governance rather than warfare. By resolving conflicts through diplomacy and fairness, a leader ensures lasting peace, harmony, and unity within the kingdom, fostering a society built on trust and cooperation (*Digha Nikaya* 26).

Moral Insights

Buddhist philosophy is always valued because of its moral insights. It focuses on the deleting of a problem from its roots. Some of the moral insights developed from the *Chakkawati sutta* are:-

i. The Cycle of Decline

The gradual breakdown of moral values shows how small lapses in ethics can lead to widespread societal problems. The text explains that failing to help those in need creates a chain reaction of negative behaviors, such as theft, dishonesty, violence, and other harmful acts. Over time, these behaviors lead to suffering, shorter lifespans, and diminished physical beauty (Bodhi 69-74). Neglecting one moral responsibility weakens the entire system, leading to the collapse of human harmony and happiness. The narrative serves as a warning, showing that a society's well-being depends on maintaining both individual and collective morality.

ii. Role of Leadership

The wheel-turning monarch symbolizes a leader who rules by following *Dhamma* or moral righteousness. This type of leadership brings stability, prosperity, and moral strength to society. The monarch protects and upholds ethical values, creating harmony and abundance through just and compassionate governance (Bodhi 75). On the other hand, when leaders neglect their responsibilities and fail to act with wisdom and kindness, moral decay spreads faster. This decline is reflected in growing greed, violence, and social discord. The text stresses the need for ethical leadership, where rulers are accountable for fostering moral order and ensuring the welfare of their people.

iii. Self-Reflection and Reform

Even during times of moral collapse, the text offers hope by emphasizing the possibility of change. In moments of crisis, individuals who choose to abandon harmful behaviors and embrace ethical practices can help reverse societal decline (Bodhi 73-74). This process begins with self-reflection, where people recognize the consequences of their actions and commit to living ethically. Individuals can bring about personal transformation and contribute to restoring societal harmony by practicing mindfulness and making conscious choices. The story demonstrates that returning to ethical behavior—such as avoiding harm and showing compassion—can lead to a renewed, stronger society.

iv. Moral Responsibility

A key idea in the *Chakkavatti-Sihanada Sutta* is that leadership is a moral responsibility rather than a privilege. A leader has to uphold moral principles, or *Dhamma* and ensure fairness and justice within society. This is exemplified by King Dalhanemi, a just ruler who governs with integrity and ensures the prosperity of his people (Walshe 397). The *sutta* warns that neglecting moral duties leads to societal decline. When leaders abandon ethical values, the story shows how greed, corruption, and moral decay lead to the collapse of social order (Harvey 125). This illustrates the deep connection between a leader's moral conduct and the stability of society.

v. Governance for Justice and Equity

The *Chakkavatti-Sihanada Sutta* emphasizes the importance of ethical governance, which focuses on moral law and cosmic order. According to the *sutta*, a ruler must govern following *Dhamma* prioritizing justice, fairness, and the well-being

of all people, regardless of social status. This form of leadership promotes equality and social justice, ensuring the collective good over personal or political interests. In today's world, dharmic principles can be applied to political and public leadership. As Smith suggests, modern leaders are called to implement policies that address inequality and serve the public interest, much like the ideals of *Dhamma* (Smith 45). This approach is also evident in business leadership, where ethical practices, sustainability, and social responsibility are increasingly seen as essential for long-term success and societal progress.

The Role of Compassion and Wisdom

Compassion and wisdom are central qualities for effective leadership in Buddhist teachings. The *Chakkavatti-Sihanada Sutta* stresses that a good leader must cultivate these traits. Compassion allows leaders to empathize with others' suffering and act kindly, while wisdom helps them make ethical and wise decisions (Bodhi 78). King Mahasudassana's story demonstrates the power of compassionate leadership, where his generosity and empathy bring harmony to his kingdom (Walshe 399). Wisdom enables leaders to navigate complex issues, making decisions that align with *Dhamma* and avoid greed, hatred, and ignorance (Harvey 127). These qualities are especially valuable in modern leadership, where decisions must balance ethical considerations with practical outcomes.

Consequences of Unethical Leadership

The *Chakkavatti-Sihanada Sutta* serves as a stark warning about the dangers of unethical leadership. When a ruler fails to follow *Dhamma* society descends into chaos. The people's disillusionment grows, and social order breaks down. The *sutta* shows that a lack of justice and virtue leads to widespread suffering, with the eventual collapse of societal structures. This failure creates the conditions for a new leader to emerge and restore balance. The lessons from the *sutta* are still relevant today, as modern societies face declining trust in political systems, populist movements, and dissatisfaction with leaders who fail to provide fair governance. Bergman notes that unethical leadership can lead to political unrest, economic crises, and social instability—issues that are becoming more apparent globally (Bergman 47).

In the corporate world, unethical leadership can also have severe consequences. Scandals involving exploitative labor practices, environmental damage, and financial misconduct show how unethical behavior in business erodes trust and contributes to broader societal problems, such as inequality and ecological harm. As the *sutta* warns,

unethical leadership not only harms individuals or organizations but also undermines the stability and well-being of society as a whole.

The Relevance of the *Chakkavatti-Sihanada Sutta* to Modern Leadership

The teachings from the *Chakkavatti-Sihanada Sutta* continue to be relevant for today's leaders, offering valuable insights into both political and corporate environments. The *sutta*'s emphasis on moral integrity, compassion, and wisdom combines with modern leadership theories that highlight the importance of ethical behavior and emotional intelligence.

For example, the *sutta*'s focus on moral responsibility is similar to the concept of servant leadership, where leaders see themselves as responsible for the well-being of others (Greenleaf 15). Additionally, the *sutta*'s call for empathy and compassion resonates with transformational leadership, which focuses on motivating and inspiring others through shared values (Bass 20). Furthermore, the *sutta*'s emphasis on wisdom can help leaders navigate complex modern challenges like globalization and environmental issues. Leaders who act with wisdom and ethical awareness can build trust and stability in society or businesses.

Practical Applications for Contemporary Leadership

Leaders today can apply the principles from the *Chakkavatti-Sihanada Sutta* to create ethical governance and management practices. Here are some practical ways to integrate these teachings:

i. Promoting Transparency and Accountability

Transparency and accountability are essential for ethical leadership. Leaders can implement independent oversight, regular audits, and clear reporting systems to ensure that their decisions are open to scrutiny. These measures promote trust and prevent corruption, ensuring that leaders remain accountable for their actions. As Smith suggests, transparency helps the public or employees feel that their interests are being prioritized, while accountability ensures that leaders are responsible for their decisions (Smith 72).

ii. Fostering Inclusivity

Inclusive leadership focuses on addressing the needs of marginalized groups

to promote fairness and reduce inequality. Leaders can build a more just and unified society by creating policies that tackle issues like poverty, discrimination, and limited access to resources. Inclusivity encourages input from various groups, which leads to innovative solutions and stronger institutions. The concept of servant leadership stresses the importance of uplifting underrepresented voices, ensuring that leadership benefits everyone (Greenleaf 15).

iii. Emphasizing Sustainability

Sustainability is vital for ensuring long-term social and environmental well-being. Leaders should align their policies with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), focusing on conservation, economic growth, and social fairness. Businesses that adopt sustainable practices and ethical supply chains build trust and contribute to global efforts like fighting climate change. Jones highlights that sustainability-focused leadership supports long-term growth and shared prosperity (Jones 104).

iv. Leading by Example

Ethical leadership requires that leaders demonstrate values like honesty, fairness, and compassion in their actions. By embodying these traits, leaders can inspire trust and foster an ethical culture within their organizations. Leaders who are transparent in their decisions, fair when resolving conflicts, and considerate of employees' needs help create a positive environment that promotes teamwork and trust (Bergman 64).

Conclusion

The *Chakkavatti-Sihanada Sutta* provides a profound framework for ethical leadership rooted in moral integrity, compassion, and wisdom. Its teachings on justice, inclusivity, and societal welfare offer timeless guidance for fostering ethical governance and effective leadership. By adopting these principles, modern leaders can address contemporary challenges and work towards a just and harmonious world.

As the global community grapples with social, economic, and environmental crises, the leadership principles outlined in the *sutta* serve as a valuable resource for creating sustainable and compassionate societies. By integrating these teachings into modern leadership practices, we can build a future guided by the enduring wisdom of Buddhist philosophy. In an era marked by political and corporate corruption, social inequality, and environmental challenges, the teachings of the *Chakkavatti-Sihanada Sutta* offer valuable guidance for leaders seeking to build just, prosperous, and ethical societies. Modern leadership, whether political, corporate, or social, can benefit from

the wisdom found in this ancient Buddhist text, which underscores the need for leaders to act with wisdom, compassion, and foresight in their decision-making.

Works Cited

- Bajracharya, Dunda Bahadur. *The Digha Nikaya*. Bir- Purna Pustak Sangrahalaya, 2000.
- Bass, Bernard M. *Transformational Leadership: Industry, Military, and Educational Impact*, Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1998.
- Bergman, George. *Ethical Leadership in the Modern World*. Routledge, 2020.
- Bergman, Sarah. *Ethics and Leadership in the Modern Era*. Cambridge University Press, 2020.
- Bodhi. *The Connected Discourses of the Buddha: A Translation of the Saṃyutta Nikāya*. Wisdom Publications, 2000.
- . *The Noble Eightfold Path: Way to the End of Suffering*. Buddhist Publication Society, 1994.
- . *The Numerical Discourses of the Buddha: A Translation of the Anguttara Nikaya*. Wisdom Publications, 2012.
- Gethin, Rupert. *The Foundations of Buddhism*. Oxford University Press, 1998.
- Greenleaf, Robert K. *Servant Leadership: A Journey into the Nature of Legitimate Power and Greatness*. Paulist Press, 1977.
- . *Servant Leadership: A Journey into the Nature of Legitimate Power and Greatness*, Paulist Press, 2002.
- Harvey, Peter. *An Introduction to Buddhism: Teachings, History, and Practices*. Cambridge University Press, 2012.
- . *An Introduction to Buddhism: Teachings, History, and Practices*. Cambridge University Press, 2013.
- . *An Introduction to Buddhist Ethics: Foundations, Values, and Issues*. Cambridge University Press, 2000.

- Jones, Peter. *Sustainability and Leadership: Transforming Vision into Practice*. Oxford University Press, 2018.
- Kovach, Bill. *The Elements of Journalism: What News People Should Know and the Public Should Expect*. Three Rivers Press, 2001.
- . *The Elements of Journalism: What News People Should Know and the Public Should Expect*. Crown Publishing, 2007.
- Rhys Davids, T.W. *Buddhist India*. Putnam, 1903.
- Smith, Emily. *Leadership in Action: Building Ethical and Accountable Institutions*. Harvard Business Review Press, 2016.
- Smith, John. *Dharma and Leadership: A Modern Approach*. Oxford University Press, 2015.
- . *Principles of Ethical Leadership: A Modern Perspective*. Oxford University Press, 2015.
- Walshe, Maurice. *The Long Discourses of the Buddha: A Translation of the Digha Nikaya*. Wisdom Publications, 1995.
- Walton, John H. *Buddhist Ethics in Leadership: A Guide for Modern Governance*. Cambridge University Press, 2011.