



A Critical Discussion on Max Weber's Argument of Buddhism as an Anti-Political Religious Philosophy

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Abstract

In spite of its relevance in everyday life, some perceive Buddhism is to be a philosophy that does not talk about mundane matters such as socio-economic and political aspects of life, therein only supra-mundane facts are discussed. For instance, Max Weber conceptualizes that Buddhism is asocial, anti-political and other-worldly religion. Such preoccupied assertions and mistaken-beliefs about original teachings of the Buddha still thrive. In this paper, thus teachings of the Buddha pertaining to the political philosophy are examined in order to refute the preoccupied assertions that Buddhism is anti-political. The embryonic form of ideas and concepts pertaining to the Buddhist Political philosophy are spread throughout the Canonical texts, mainly in Sutta Pitaka, Vinaya Pitaka and in Jātaka stories in which significant philosophical delineations are explained as ethical and didactic theories and can explicitly be used in today's political arena. Finally, by explaining the political teachings of the Buddha, the paper proves that Max Weber's misconception is groundless and unjustifiable.

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INTRODUCTION

Among many theistic religions, Buddhism stands as an atheistic doctrine that teaches a great ethical philosophy that can be practised by any person. The main objective of Buddhism is to show the 'reality' of beings, their environment and universe and guides people to the ultimate happiness. Buddhist teachings can be categorized into two sections, such as,

- i. Fundamental teachings: Four Noble Truths, Eightfold Path, Interdependent origination, Causality, Doctrine of *Kamma* and *Punabbhava*, etc.
- ii. Secondary teachings: Buddhist Social Philosophy, Buddhist Environmental Philosophy, Buddhist Economic Philosophy, Buddhist Political Philosophy, Philosophy of history etc.

Fundamental teachings are conducive to terminate the *samsāric* suffering (suffering which arises in the process of recurrent births and deaths) and would pave the way for ultimate happiness, and the secondary teachings are mainly expounded for the welfare and happiness of secular life. The political philosophy explained in Buddhism, therefore, is conducive to the appropriate political governance of a country. Max Weber, mistakenly holds the opinion that Buddhism is a-social and anti-political. In this research paper, an effort has been made to prove that there is a precise

political philosophy that is more appropriate to modern society.

RESEARCH PROBLEM

Although Max Weber is a world-renowned sociologist and is considered to be the "Father of Sociology of Religion", it is difficult to agree with his opinions and arguments since evidence refutes his preoccupied ideas about Buddhism. His statement that "Buddhism is anti-political" should be methodically examined. This research paper strives to explore whether Buddhism is anti-political as specified by Max Weber in his book "The Religion of India" (Weber, 1967) comparing with the doctrinal teachings of Buddhism.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVE

By examining some discourses of the *SuttaPitaka*, *VinayaPitaka* and some other related teachings found in the *Jātaka* stories, this research paper tries to prove that there is a clear-cut political philosophy expounded by the Buddha in the 6th century B.C. and to show how such teachings explained in the early Buddhist philosophy helpnegate the opinion of Max Weber.

RESEARCH METHOD

The literary survey was employed for this research work. First, the statement of Max Weber was taken into consideration carefully. Then the theories, teachings, information, and exegetical analysis pertaining to Buddhist political philosophy were collected from some discourses of the



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Sutta Pitaka, exegetical texts and the *Jātaka* stories. The research is limited to the *Aggaññasutta*, the *Cakkavattisihanādasutta*, the *Kūtadantasutta*, *Suttanipāta*, essential parts of the *Vinaya Pitaka* and some *Jātaka* stories in order to prove that there is a political philosophy in Buddhism. Finally, this paper provides a conclusion that Max Weber's opinion of Buddhist political philosophy is misleading and unjustifiable.

DISCUSSION

Max Weber's Opinion

Max Weber arrived at a conclusion that 'Buddhism is asocial, anti-political, and other-worldly religion'. Weber states: "It is a specifically unpolitical and anti-political status religion. Buddhism had no sort of tie with any sort of "social" movement, nor did it run parallel with such and it has established no 'social-political goal' (Weber, 1967:206-226). This can be considered a groundless misconception that Max Weber specified. It seems that he rushed into this conclusion without referring to Early Buddhist Texts, and he might have considered just the noticeable societal condition that he experienced during his visit to India.

Stanislav Andreski (1984) critically describes his view on Max Weber's ideas on religion such as: "He does not restrict the applicability of his generalizations to a particular country or period and offers them as

indications of cross-cultural tendencies. He illustrates them by examples of debatable correctness and does not even attempt to substantiate them by marshalling evidence. The truth is that historical data needed to justify such generalizations were not available to him and scarcely exist even now" (Andreski, 1984:94). It is accepted that Max Weber's opinions are a source of new suggestions and foundations for research works and they paved the way for hundreds of new researches and findings. It seems some of his opinions on religion, especially on Buddhism are debatable.

Besides the basic philosophical teachings, Buddhism categorically introduces secondary teachings in regard to economic, environmental, political and social philosophy. Although the term 'Politics' means 'power in public life and being able to influence decisions that affect the country, it really means philanthropy or service to human beings' (Rahula, 1974). A variety of political systems are found in the world today: Capitalism, Communism, Socialism, and Democracy etc. Whatever the political system may be, the major policy undercurrent of the system is to provide a service to society.

Buddha's First Counsel

When sixty-one (61) *arahants* in the world appeared, the Buddha gave a major advice to them; "*Carathabhikkhavecārikam bahujanahitāya¹bahujanasukhāyalokanuka*



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mpāyaatthāyahitāyasukhāyadevamanussā nam" (*Vinaya* II, 1879:21) that means: "Monks, Walk on tour for the blessing of the many, for the happiness of the many people, out of compassion for the world, for the welfare, the blessing, the happiness of *devas* and men". This is the major objective of the *arahanta* society (Society of Perfected Ones) and it can be considered to be a great socio-political thought. Therefore, it is not incorrect to say that by giving his first counsel and guidance to first sixty *arahants*, the Buddha initiated his socio-economic, political and spiritual service for a sustainable society. Regarding the first counsel of the Buddha, Prof. Asanga Tilakaratne categorically asserts: 'The concept of 'welfare and happiness of the multitude' (*bahujana-hitabahuja-sukha*) which is essentially a political goal, is found from the very beginning of the ministry of the Buddha' (Tilakaratne, 2011:154).

Origin of the State

In the ancient world, people believed that the king or the State organization was a creation of the god. During the medieval period, in Europe, various notions were found regarding the origin of the state. In accordance with Divine Right theory, States are established by God or the gods, and the ruler has the divine right to rule (Ariyadeva, 2009:254; Sharma, 1985:19). With regard to the origin of the State, the 'Social contract theory' can be considered to be a well-known theory.

Thomas Hobbes, Plato, J.J. Rousseau, and John Locke presented the Social Contract Theory (Barker, 1960). 'It concerns the legitimacy of the authority of the State over the individual. Individuals surrender some of their freedom and submit to the authority of the ruler in exchange for protection of their remaining rights or maintenance of the social order'(Barker, 1960:32). Some scholars believe that Buddhism also expounds the social contract theory. A.L. Basham (1954) suggests that the legend of '*Mahā-sammata*' (The Great Elect) mentioned in the *Sanskrit* Buddhist text *Mahāvastu* gives the account of social contract theory (Basham, 1954:82). It is to be noted here that the *Aggaññasutta* of the *Digha Nikāya* also provides a detailed account of '*Mahā-sammata*' (*DighaNikaya* III, 1976:93).

Governmental Contract Theory

Buddhist explanations are closer to the 'Governmental Contract Theory'. *Aggaññasutta* explains:

"....Now those beings, *Vasettha*, gathered themselves together, and bewailed these things, saying: From our evil deeds, sirs, becoming manifest, inasmuch as stealing, censure, lying, punishment have become known, what if we were to select a certain being, who should be wrathful when indignation is right, who should ensure that which



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should rightly be censured and should banish him who deserves to be banished?" (*Digha Nikāya* III, 1976:93).

The *sutta* further explains that the nature of the first ruler of the earth as: "Chosen by each and every member of community", is what meant by *Mahā Sammata*; so *Mahā Sammata* (the Great Elect) was the first standing phrase to arise" (*Digha Nikāya* III, 1976:p.93; Dialogues of the Buddha III, 1991:p.88). According to *Aggaññasutta*, it is very clear that political authority totally depends on the consent of the public.

Reasons for Origin of the State

Before explaining the appointment of the first ruler, the Great Elect, *Aggaññasutta* provides various reasons for this appointment for ruling the world society.

- i. The appearance of private property system (At the outset, there was a system of common property in the world. Later, they divided off the rice fields and set boundaries. Then, the private property system appeared)
- ii. The manifestation of evil deeds, such as stealing, censure, lying, and punishment
- iii. Organization of family life and social life on earth (*Digha Nikāya* III, 1976:93).

Because of these reasons, people elected *Mahāsammata*,² a proper person with a juridical power to safeguard private property and family life, and

also to administer society so that it does not encounter corruptions. He was called '*Mahāsammata*' since he was elected by the consent of people. Therefore, this idea is closer to Governmental contract theory, and it may also be termed as the "**Socio-Governmental Contract Theory**".

Expressions of *Khattiya* and *Rāja*

Furthermore, *Aggaññasutta* explains the true meanings of the two expressions of *khattiya* and *rāja*. 'Lord of the fields is what is meant by *khattiya*; so *khattiya* (Noble) was the next expression to arise' (*Digha Nikāya* III, 1976:93). The term indicates the ownership of land. This expression is mainly related to agriculture and production that is considered to be the very foundation of society. Then, *Aggaññasutta* explains the term '*rāja*' (or king)³ and, it means 'He who gladdens others by righteousness' (*Digha Nikāya* III, 1976:87-93). Here, it is said that the major objective of the king is to delight his subjects in righteous ways. These are the ancient and important political expressions interpreted in *Aggaññasutta*.

Nature of the Political Authority

In the ancient and medieval period, rulers promulgated the idea that they rule the country by the authorization of God or gods or any other divine permission. This notion is totally rejected in *Aggaññasutta*. It explains that the origin of the political authority comes from the common consent of



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people. The Great Elect (*Mahā Sammata*) was given his juridical power by the common consent of whole community. Therefore, according to Buddhist notions it never depends on any divine power. In order to maintain political authority in a manner consistent with accepted ethical principles, the ruler should observe ten *Cakkavatti* principles. The ruler or the government should take the common consent of its citizens for any general development affairs or special projects of the country.

Vox Populi

According to Buddhists discourses, the king's sovereignty is a secondary matter. His first concern should be the *VoxPopuli*, (Consent of the People) stick to principles of the country and welfare of its people. *Cakkavattisihanādasutta* elucidates the idea of *Voxpopuli* in this way: 'By his own ideas, forsooth, he governed his people; and they so governed, differently from what they had been, did not prosper as they used to do under former kings who had carried out the *Aryan* duty of a Sovereign king' (*Digha Nikāya* III,1976:93). The *Pāli* term found in the *Cakkavattisihanādasutta*, "*samatena*"⁴ suggests, 'negligence of people's voice', in other words the political leaders tend to misuse political authority in line with own accord thereby neglecting voice of the populace. When a ruler works only by his own ideas, the country would be in disarray, everything would turn upside down. According

to Buddhist *suttas*, fundamental condition of ruling is to respect to *Vox Populi* under any system of government.

CAKKAVATTI-VATTĀNI OR THE STATE POLICIES

Cakkavatti-vattāni and Righteousness

The fundamental policies of a state can be found clearly in *Cakkavattisihanādasutta*. At first, the ruler must be a righteous one and should rule the country righteously (*Digha Nikāya* iii, 1976:p.93). The kingship or the political authority is not the paternal heritage⁵ or '*pettikamdāyajjam*' (*Digha Nikāya* III, 1976:93). The *sutta* explains that '*dibbamcakkaratam*' (Celestial Wheel) is not the paternal heritage. Here, the Celestial Wheel symbolizes the political authority of governance. Under the *Cakkavatti-vattāni*, (government policies) the major principle of the governance is explained as: '...Leaning on the *Dhamma*, honouring, respecting and revering it, doing homage to it, hallowing it, being thyself a *Dhamma*-banner, a *Dhamma*-signal, having the *Dhamma* as your master ...' (*DighaNikāya* III,1976:61). This statement emphatically affirms the commitment of 'righteousness' for good governance⁶. The fundamental policies explained in *Cakkavattisihanādasutta* are closely related to Politics and Political philosophy. Therefore, the argument on Buddhism as an anti-political philosophy is significantly contrasting.



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Writing an introduction to *Cakkavattisihanādasutta*, Professor Rhys Davids (1991) asserts: "The point of moral-and in this fairy tale the moral is the thing-is the reign of Law. Never before in the history of the world had this principle been proclaimed in so thorough-going and uncompromising away" (Dialogues of the Buddha III: 53). According to the summary of *Cakkavattisihanādasutta*, major policies of a kingdom can be listed as follows:

- i. Constitutional protections for all living beings including animals and other beings,
- ii. Law and State affairs shall be depended on the 'Righteousness',
- iii. Alleviation of poverty,
- iv. To protect the natural environment,
- v. To solve socio-economic crises

These political policies are pertaining to the economy, environment, righteousness, and necessary defence of the country (*Digha Nikāya* III, 1976:58-70; Dhammajoti, 2000). Even in modern society, these are the expectations that citizens of a country mainly look for. Therefore, it seems that the state policies mentioned in *Cakkavattisihanādasutta* categorically rejects Max Weber's position.

Root Causes of Social Revolutions

The root causes of socio-economic and political revolutions are explained in *Cakkavattisihanādasutta* i: '...when there were no means of living (from goods not being bestowed on the destitute) poverty grew rife; from poverty

growing rife stealing increased, from the spread of stealing weapons grew great; When weapons were available in large quantities, violence grew apace; from the growth of violence the destruction of life became common, from the frequency of murder, ...lying,.... back-biting,sexual misconduct, ...harsh speech, frivolous talks, ...covetousness and ill-will.....false opinions.....incest, wanton greed and perverted lust....till finally lack of filial and religious piety and lack of regard for the head (elders) of the clan grew great.⁷ For these things growing, the life-span of those beings and also the comeliness of them wasted away...' (*Digha Nikāya* III, 1976:70-71).

Here, we find a special *Pāli* term: "*ananuppadiyamāne*" and the translation was given to it in Sinhala and English versions are not precise enough to give the correct idea. Translating this passage, Ananda Wijeratne (2011) writes: 'When the wealth of the country is not properly distributed amongst the subjects the rich and poor divide will widen. It seems here that Wijeratne (2011) confines to the given meaning in the translation and does not focus on the deeper meaning of this historical word. It is to be noted here that for the term, "*ananuppadiyamāne*" the better English equivalent translation would be 'when there were no means of living'; and not the 'mal-distribution of wealth' as Wijeratne suggests. The root causes mentioned in *Cakkavattisihanādasutta*



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for stirring up of revolutions can clearly be seen in everywhere in the world. Explanations of revolutions and their root causes mentioned in the Buddhist discourses are pertaining to the political field. The discussion of social revolution in this *sutta* directly related to politics of a country.

Four Wrong-causes of Political Life

According to *Sigālasutta* of *Digha Nikāya*, people commit evil deeds from motives of partiality (attachment - *chandā*), enmity (*dosā*), stupidity (*mohā*) and fear (*bhayā*) (*Digha Nikāya* III, 1976:182). It is clear that some political leaders of the world today, rule their countries in unrighteous ways because of these wrong causes of life. The kings, administrators and other governing bodies essentially are supposed to avoid these four wrong causes of life (*agate-gamaniyanī*) for righteous and good governance. It is the ultimate accountability of the king to provide a service without any partiality and provide a proper environment for their peaceful living.

Tenfold Rules of Governing

Tenfold royal duties are prescribed for rulers in Buddhist texts for peaceful and righteous governing. These guidelines provide them to lead their royal life without socio-economic and political blemishes. The tenfold royal duties of a monarch or government are mentioned as follows:

Generosity or alms-giving, (*dāna*), Morality or controlling of his

senses (*sila*), Liberality or making sacrifices for citizens (*pariccāga*), Straight forwardness in his political dealings (*ajjava*), Kind-heartedness and gentleness (*maddava*), Self-restriction (*tapa*), Non-anger (*akkoda*), Compassion or non-hurtfulness (*avihimsā*), Tolerance (*khanti*), and Non-opposition (*avirodhana*) (*Jātaka* I,1990:399; *Jātaka* III,1990:274).

These are referred to as "*dasa-rājadhamma*" or ten points of righteousness-governing explained in various *Jātaka* stories (previous birth stories of the Buddha). The specific way of governing is explained in *Jātaka* stories: 'he ruled in righteousness, not shaking the tenfold code of the king'. Therefore, according to Buddhist texts, this tenfold code of governing is an essential part of the ruler. In this way, *Jātaka* stories provide fundamental socio-economic, political and psychological theories, and many stories are pertaining to political governing, e.g. *Mahāsupina Jātaka* and *Rājovāda Jātaka*. Therefore, Buddhist texts prescribe political theories of good governing and it is thus contradictory to assert that Buddhism is anti-political as Max weber suggested.

Sevenfold Conditions of Prosperity

Vajjian kings followed sevenfold conditions taught by the Buddha and continued to rule their *Vajjian* confederacy without any socio-economic problems and any sort of deterioration. Sevenfold doctrines



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(*sattaaparīhānīyadhamma*) paved the way for their progress and was mentioned as follows:

“To hold regular and frequent assemblies; To meet in harmony, break up in harmony, and carry on their business in harmony; To do not authorize what has not been authorized already, and to do not abolish what has been authorized; To honor, respect, revere and salute the elders among them, and consider them worth listening to; To do not forcibly abduct others' wives and daughters and compel them to live with them; To honor, respect, revere and salute the (*Vajjian*) shrines at home and abroad, not withdrawing the proper support made and given before; Make proper provision for the safety of *arahants* (Perfected Ones), so that such *arahants* may come in future to live there, and those already there may dwell in comfort” (*Digha Nikāya* II, 1982:73-75).

As long as rulers govern their countries under the guidance of these seven conditions, according to the word of the Buddha, they are expected to prosper and not to decline. These conditions are strictly related to the field of political institutions and they pave the way for prosperity, peaceful governance, moral qualities in the country and safeguard of rulers in turn. *Mahā-parinibbānasutta* further expounds different sets of seven-fold laws pertaining to the progress and prosperity of monks and laypeople.

Therefore, it is clear that Buddhism expounds political theories.

CAKKAVATTI KINGS AND ETHICAL AUTHORITY

Cakkavatti Kings

Cakkavatti kings (Wheel-turning Monarchs or Rulers who preserve the law and order) are considered to be the powerful righteous kings who rule their territories with political principles by way of higher ethical values. Three sorts of *Cakkavāla* kings are mentioned in the Buddhist texts, such as:

- i. *Cakkavāla Cakkavatti* – A Universal monarch or *Caturanta Cakkavāla* who is ruling over four Great continents
- ii. *Dipa Cakkavatti* - A Universal monarch ruling over one continent
- iii. *Padesa Cakkavatti* - A monarch ruling over a part of a continent. This categorical definition is given in various places of fundamental discourses and their commentaries (*Sutta Nipāta*, 1918:106; *Sumangalavilāsini* I, 1968:249; *Digha Nikāya* I, 1983:88; PTS Dictionary, 1992:259).

The given *Pāli* formula for understanding the nature of a previous *Cakkavāla Cakkavattī* king is: '*so imam pathavimsāgara-pariyamtamadandenaasatthenadhammena abhivijjīyājjhāvāsi...*' - He lived in supremacy over this earth to its ocean bounds, having conquered it, not by the scourge, not by the sword, but by righteousness (*Digha Nikāya* III,



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1976:59; Dialogues of the Buddha III, 1991:60). This means that *Cakkavāla Cakkavatti* monarch is a world ruler and he ruled the world 'without punishment, without weapons, and in a righteous way'. It is clear that *Cakkavatti* concept found in the Buddhist texts provide a political theory which may be more favourable even to modern society. The very foundation of '*Cakkavatti* ruling' is '*Dhamma*' or 'righteousness'. Therefore, the significance of this political theory is that 'Political Authority', gradually, turns into the 'Ethical Authority' (Dhammajoti, 2000:91).

Ballot System

In Buddhist *sangha* assemblies, announcements are made three times, the motion is put three times, and decisions are declared three times in disciplinary matters (*Vinaya* I, 1964:56; *Vinaya* II, 1879:89). When there is a moot point in disciplinary matters to be settled among the *sangha* confraternity, the method of taking votes is used in Buddhist *sangha* assemblies. They practised three methods of taking votes, viz;

- i. *Gūlhaka* - Secret Ballot,
- ii. *Vivataka*- Open Ballot, and
- iii. *Sakannajappaka*- whispering in the ear (a method of taking votes secretly) (*Vinaya* II, 1879:99).

Today, the secret ballot and the open ballot systems are practised in global political assemblies. Although this ballot system is very ancient, it has been practised in Buddhist *sangha*

assemblies for more than two thousand six hundred years. This is certainly pertinent to political matters of *sangha* society and it sets up an example for path to lay society in order to solve disciplinary disputes.

CONCLUSION

It is clear that Buddhist doctrines, although they are in a narrative style, suggests more favourable political principles for any kind of State whether it is Capitalistic, Socialistic, or Democratic. It seems that Buddhist teachings explained in this paper are closer to Democratic and Socialist system of administration. Even so, under the Capitalistic political system, Buddhist teachings may be applied under the policy of "Righteousness". *Cakkavāla Cakkavatti* type of ruling is the "World Ruler or Global system of political administration'. The Buddha emphatically states the theory of "Righteousness" in political administration and that type of country is called "the kingdom of Righteousness". In the Buddhist point of view, 'Righteousness' seems to be the fundamental theory of any kind of political governance. Buddhist teachings of the Origin of State, First Counsel of the Buddha, nature of Political Authority, Sevenfold Conditions of Prosperity, Tenfold Rules of Governing, *Cakkavatti* kings, Ballot systems, *Voxpopuli*, Root causes of Revolutions, and State policies are directly pertaining to political philosophy of Buddhism. There are



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some other doctrines that reject Max Weber's argument but quite a few among them have been selected here. Therefore, this paper suggests that Buddhism is not anti-political as Max Weber explains, and it clearly contains a favourable political philosophy for the modern world.

NOTES

1. Horner translates the term 'bahujanahitāya' as 'blessings', but better English equivalent for 'bahujanahitāya' is 'welfare of the many'.
2. The Pāli formula for the statement runs thus: *'Mahajana-sammato'tikhoVasethmahā-sammato, mahasammatotv'evapathamamakkharamupanibbattam'*.
3. The Pāli formula for 'rājā' is: "Dhammena pare ranjetitikhovasettharājā..."
4. *'samatenajanapadampasāsato pubbenāparam janapadāpabbanti....ariyecakkavattivattevattamanānam'*; 'samatena' means 'by his own ideas'-(*DighaNikāya*, III,1976:65)
5. *'nahitetātadibbamcakkaratanampettikamdayajjam'*- (*DighaNikāya* III,1976:59).
6. *'dhammamyevanissāyadhammamsakkarontodhammangarukarontodhammamānentodham mampujentodhammapacāyamāno, dhammaddhajodhammaketudhammādhipeyyodhammikamrakkhavarana-guttimsamvidahassu'*, (*DighaNikāya* III,1976:61)
7. *'.....adhanānamdhaneanupadiyamānedāli ddiyamvepullamagamāsi, dālididiye...adinnādānam..., ...sattham ..., ..pānātipato..., ... musāvādo ...pisunavācā..., ...kāmesumicchācāro..., ...dvedhammā...pharusavācāsamphappalāpoca. abhiijhā-vyāpado..., micchādītthi...,...adhammarāgo visamalobhomicchā-dhammo,amatteyyatāpetteyyatāasāmaññātaabrahmaññātakule-*

jetthāpacāyitā.....',(*DighaNikāya* III,1976:70-71).

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