

## A Study of some Virtues in Buddhist Ethics

Tin Tin Cho\*

### Abstract

The aim of this paper is an attempt to show why loving-kindness or *Mettā* is the most essential virtue in Myanmar Buddhist Ethics.<sup>1</sup> The Four Cardinal Virtues are the essence of moral codes of Myanmar Culture in which it covers directly or indirectly all good deeds of Myanmar, such as moral codes of individual person, that of the class or the role and that of the whole society.<sup>2</sup> The descriptive method and evaluative method will be used to show the important role of ethical virtues in Myanmar culture.<sup>3</sup> Based on the principle of social relationship<sup>4</sup>, moral principles will be shown to achieve proper training in order to be good for social and spiritual development. This paper will contribute to realization that whatever good actions people do, it cannot be independent to Four Cardinal Virtues.<sup>5</sup>

**Key words:** virtue, loving-kindness, Buddhist Ethics

### Introduction

Ethics is the study of morals or moralities which imply habits, customs, usages, characters and traditions. In other words, ethics concern with human actions that may be good or bad, right or wrong, just or unjust. Ethics, thus, is the study of human conducts that “ought” to behave in the relations of man by man and, man and his society.

In Buddhist philosophy, we find that the Buddha as a philosopher was not interested in metaphysical problems, but rather devoted his effort to promoting ethical standards in society. People in modern society pay little attention to moral values. They attempt to solve problems by theories, legislation, and regulations based on moral principles. But Buddhist ethics attempts to find the basic problems with a society. According to Buddhist ethics, the basic problem of societies in general is that people allow themselves to be taken in too much by the value to material things. Thus, they are deceived into either loving or hating, thereby making our lives unbalanced and morally impossible. Therefore, Buddhism maintained that it is necessary to get proper training in order to be good for social and spiritual development.

Buddhist ethics attempts to build a society on a moral ground which is firm and strong; it attempts to train people who live on morally stable and safe ground. For this reason, it is necessary to understand what Buddhists trainings are. In Buddhist ethics, there are four practices of mental development or the four cardinal virtues (*Brahmavihāra*). These virtues are (1) the virtue of loving-kindness (*Mettā*), (2) the virtue of compassion (*Karunā*), (3) the virtue of Sympathetic Joy (*Muditā*), and (4) the virtue of Impartiality (*Upekkhā*). According to Buddhist ethics, the four cardinal virtues are not only the criteria which determine the morality good or bad of men, but are also the paths to reach a state free from suffering.

In society, people live together and are bound to each other, not by mere instincts and impulses, but by the rational application of certain elements of moral and spiritual values. In our Myanmar Culture, there are different moral codes which guide to our deeds to behave in different level, places, and times in order to bring forth good lives both in present and future time, in other words, to be well being both in mundane and religious lives.

### Different Kinds of Good Actions in Myanmar Culture

In analyzing the different good deeds of Myanmar Culture, we may categorize three groups; they are (1) The good deeds which are concerned with individual persons; it means that the good deeds to be observed are concerned with individual persons. He may observe as

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\*Dr., Lecturer, Department of Philosophy, Dagon University

many moral codes as he may; the more he can keep moral codes the better he may be. (2) The good deeds which are concerned with a certain class or a role; it means that a person may play a certain role or may involve in a certain group as a member of certain class such as parent, offspring, teacher, pupil, husband, wife, etc. There he must keep the moral codes which are laid down by the class for the well relation between them. It can thus be named Class or Role moral codes. (3) It is concerned with the whole society or all the people of Myanmar Society. They ought to keep the moral codes in order to get auspiciousness for the benefit of the whole society.

### **Moral Codes for the Individual Persons**

Those moral codes are concerned with individual person to be kept; he may keep only one precept or two or five or more than five precepts. The more he could preserve precepts the better he is; how many precepts to be observed depend on the individual persons according to his abilities and situations he is given.

The Five Precepts (*Panca-Sila*) is the basic Buddhist moral code. These five precepts are - not to kill, not to steal, not to commit sexual misconduct, not to lie and not to indulge in intoxicants. All Buddhists are called upon to observe at least these Five Precepts. The First Precept is “not to kill”. It means not only to kill but also not to harm, not to destroy, not to damage all forms of lives from big animals to small insects and their embryos and eggs. Its negative (opposite) aspect is to have loving-kindness, sympathy, and kindness.

The Second Precept is “not to steal”. It means to abstain from stealing. Its negative aspect is to offer, to donate, to provide the material welfares to the others. The Third Precept is “abstaining from sexual misconducts”. It means we should be virtue by avoiding wrong sexual activities because it bears the hatred, the anger, the revenge and other miserable activities. The Fourth Precept is “not to lie.” It means shunning false speech and we should be truthful. The Fifth Precept is “avoiding intoxicating drinks.” The drinking liquor promotes heedlessness. Not drinking any liquor is necessary to keep one healthy both physically and mentally.

In our Myanmar Society if a person can keep the five precepts he is a good man. The deeds which are nearly relevant with five principles he is acknowledged as a moral person and his actions are virtue. If a person finds these five moral codes too elementary he may advance a step further and observe the eight or ten precepts; and he is regarded better man in morality. He is expected to live a life of virtue, celibacy, simplicity and self-control, and well-being might overcome worldly bonds. All his actions are virtuous.

### **Moral Codes for the Class or the Role**

There are special moral codes laid down to follow for all the members of a certain class in Myanmar Culture. A person who may be occupied with some work or duty may play a certain role in class or group. Then he has responsibility to observe the rules and principle laid down by that class or group tending for the welfares of the members of the class. We all Myanmar must follow these rules of duty according to one's taking part in a certain role in society. These are socio-ethical duties. This is ethics of duty found in the verses written by Thingaza sayadaw.

In his verses duties to be performed by each member of the society are mentioned in our society everybody ought to do his duties in relation to others.

- (1) There are five duties to be performed by sons and daughters in relation to their parents.
- (2) There are five rules of duty which parents have relation to their sons and daughters.

- (3) There are five rules of duty to be obeyed by the pupils and students in relation to their teacher
- (4) The teachers have to perform the five duties in relation to pupil or students.
- (5) There are five rules of duty by a friend in relation to other friends.
- (6) There are five rules of duty to perform by a wife in relation to her husband.
- (7) There are five rules of duty to be performed by a husband in relation to his wife.
- (8) There are six rules of duty by a person holding an important and leading post.
- (9) There are five rules of duty by the master in relation to the servants.
- (10) There are five rules of duty by the servants in relation to the masters.

The above Moral Codes of the Class or Role Responsibilities may be active and applicable only when each person must have mutual understanding, and each and every one must appreciate their responsibilities, their duty and obligation in the roles they take parts. In order to have mutual relationship and understanding between them there must be a tie which bridges their minds; it is the motives of loving-kindness, compassion, and sympathy; in short, *Bhrahma vihara tayar*.

### **The Four Cardinal Virtues**

The Four Cardinal Virtues or Four *Brahma Vihara Tayars* are the essence of Myanmar Ethics; they are the sublime states of mind, and they are the key of Myanmar Moral Codes because all three kind norms of good deeds mentioned above such as, 1. The norm of the good deeds for the individual persons, 2. That of for the class and 3. That of for the whole society is overwhelmed by it. They thus may be named the nut-shell of Myanmar Ethics. They are to be nurtured by all Buddhists. These virtues are *Mettā, Karunā, Muditā, Uppekha*.

### **The Virtue of Loving-kindness (*Mettā*)**

The virtue of loving-kindness occupies a prominent place in the Buddhist teachings. It is one of the factors most beneficial both to spiritual development and the development of a sound pacific relationship in society. By cultivation this virtue, people should neither allow their minds to become not perverted with enmity nor utter any evil speech but with the thought of loving-kindness and love towards such and such person. By starting from one person, they should extend it and suffuse the whole world with the heart of loving-kindness, widespread immeasurable, without enmity and malevolence.

Loving-kindness works for the disappearance of ill-will and it is based on treating other people with kindness. When one succeeds in practicing it, it helps one to eliminate ill-will, but one should be careful not to let it degenerate into selfish affectionate desire. In order to cultivate the emotion of loving-kindness, one is advised to meditate at first on oneself by repeatedly thinking like that “I am happy and free from suffering. I live my life free from hostility and trouble and live happily.” This Buddhist contention seems to imply paradoxically, however it might sound, that in order to love other, one ought to love oneself and make oneself beloved too, so that love for oneself is held to indicate the level to which the love for others should be raised and to constitute the measure, pattern and value of one’s own love for others. True self-interest should induce one to love the interest of others, because to do so is advantageous to oneself too. The man of loving-kindness wishes others to be happy and that is clearly to his own advantage since, at least it makes them so much more pleasant to live with. Thus it is by cultivation within oneself the thought as “I am happy.” as starting point and example that one begins to be interested in the welfare and interest of others and to feel their

happiness as one's own. It means just as I want happiness and fear suffering and just as I want to live and not to die, so also others want happiness and fear suffering and want to live and not to die.

In the process of practicing the virtue of loving-kindness, one is further exhorted to do so first towards one's dearly beloved companion, and then towards other people that are neutral by regarding them as one's dearly beloved companion, and lastly towards one's enemies by regarding them as neutral. Thus one will be able to regard one's enemy without resentment but with loving-kindness in the same way as one does one's own admired, dearly beloved companion and as a person that is neutral. Therefore, one should extend loving-kindness towards all living beings equally without making any difference between oneself and others. or between one's own beloved, favorite, pleasant and agreeable people and those who are neutral to oneself, and even one's enemy. With one's whole heart and all one's self suffused with loving-kindness, one identifies oneself with all, be they inferior, middling or superior, be they friends, foes or neutral, etc. without making any distinction between them and oneself, and one arouses one's interest and aspiration for the achievement of their welfare and happiness and for their release from harm and suffering.

The exercise of loving-kindness leads one to the path of non-violence which consists therein that one delights in the happiness of others and does no harm to anyone and tries to cultivate sentiments of loving-kindness. By this way, one trains himself in treating his fellow man in the righteous manner with tranquility of thought, speech and deed, cultivates a patient and benevolent attitude towards others, neither reviling those who revile him nor insulting those who insult him nor abusing those who abuse him. Moreover, it can be seen that a person who has attained the freedom of mind through the virtue of loving-kindness practiced with all devotion of thought and constant meditation and has increased it and firmly establish himself in it, will surely experience the following eleven advantages. He sleeps happily, wakes up happily, dreams no evil dream, is dear both to human beings and to non-human beings, the gods guard him is easily and calmly concentrated, the expression of his face is serene, at the moment of his death he dies without confusion, and if he cannot reach the higher state of salvation he will reach the excellent existence in heaven.

### **The Virtue of Compassion (*Karunā*)**

The term 'compassion' designates the social emotion that expresses itself in a sense of participation with others in their troubles and difficulties. It is making one's heart tremble and shivers at the sight and thought about the suffering experienced by others, and even arouses the desire to take upon oneself these things, to put an end to them and to strive to do something to help and release others from them. When a compassion person sees or hears or even thinks of others who live in troubled circumstances, his heart becomes overwhelmed with compassion.

The virtue of compassion has its characteristic the activity of removing from other people bad condition of life that cause trouble; it has for its essence the inability to neglect others' sufferings; it has for its function the establishment of selflessness, and for its basis the sigh of helplessness of others in such bad conditions. In a word a compassionate person is unhappy at seeing others in troubles; he feels himself in solidarity with them and furthermore attempts to make them happy. He counts the harm and other bad conditions of others as his own, and in this manner he identifies himself with others who are in pain, depression, frustration, misery, calamity lamentation, horror and so on. Therefore the social emotion of compassion signifies the virtue which is cultivated with a view, on the one hand, to uproot the ill-will to harm others and to decrease the evil habit of selfishness, and on the other hand, to do good to them, to make people sensitive to the troubles and difficulties of others to such an extent that they do not wish to increase them further, but to decrease and remove them.

In order to cultivate and develop the virtue of compassion one goes through a process similar to that of loving-kindness, but the objects towards which compassion to be expressed are those who are in trouble and difficulties, seeing whom one feels compassionate and strives to help and make them free from such situations as much as possible.

### **The Virtue of Sympathetic Joy (*Muditā*)**

The virtue that makes one glad, joyful when seeing or hearing of or even recollecting the success and happiness of others, is called *Muditā*. It has for its characteristic the state of (*Muditā*) rejoicing, for its essence the absence of envying, for its function the suppression of disgust, and for its basis the cheerful acknowledgement of good fortune and prosperity achieved by others. From the above description we see that the virtue of sympathetic joy requires a deliberate effort to identify oneself with those who live successfully and happily and that it enables a person to feel a genuine joy at the happiness of others as much as at his own. It also enables him to share with others their joy of possession, their material or spiritual success, their promotions to positions of civil or national or other importance, or their receipt of titles and glories. It counteracts conceits of all kinds, and its growth and development check craving's grasp in the heart of man. A person particularly one who is under the influence of jealousy, is advised to cultivate this social emotion of sympathetic joy. He arouses within himself thoughts that foster this emotion and cultivates the habit of sincerely congratulating those who are released from troubles and difficulties and attain the fulfillment of their wishes. He rejoices with them in their welfare, prosperity and well-being.

On seeing or hearing or even recollecting others to be happy, cheerful or joyous, the man of sympathetic joy thinks with himself: 'verily, how good, how excellent is it that this fellow lives happily'. He treats all people, and even all living beings, with whole-hearted gladness in the same manner as he does himself and his own beloved person. Moreover, he pays that their good fortune, prosperity and well-being may last long.

The virtue of sympathetic joy helps a man to learn how to appreciate, with sincere heart, the prosperous conditions of others, to be heartily pleasant in his dealings with them, and to share their happiness even by making it resound in his own heart. It also furthers the sense of altruism and subdues the latent feelings of ill-will against people in superior position. By virtue of his ability to identify himself with others the sympathetic man always welcomes with joy the happiness of his fellow men and never welcomes their miseries, and gets rid of what we might call mental isolation caused by selfishness. In the depth of their hearts, some people harbor a definite aversion to dwelling on the happiness of others, since egoism and jealousy are strong and deep-seated, though really admitted, counterforce in their minds. All the time, we find, men jealously compare their lot with that of others and grudge others their good fortune which eludes them. Therefore, to remove this evil attitude and habit the cultivation of the social spirit of sympathetic joy is introduced.

### **The Virtue of Impartiality (*Upekkhā*)**

This virtue in its literal sense implies the enabling one to keep one's own mind in a balanced state. In spiritual practice, *Upekkhā* is understood in the sense of tranquility of mind in its neutral state, neither pleasant nor unpleasant. This means the stale, middle state of thought that causes the mind to remain serenely identical with itself in its calm state and prevents it from being carried away by any other object. From the *kammic* point of view, we find that it implies the arousing of equal attitude towards all living beings and makes one see them as equals in as far as there is a possibility, according to the law of *kamma*, for all of them to act and react freely and live in accordance with their own actions. In this aspect, the virtue of impartiality points to two considerations. In the first place, one is advised to realize that all

beings are all essentially the same under the natural law of impermanency, suffering and non-soul. In the other, one considers the effect of action which all beings have on themselves and the reason why they act as they act and endure what they endure. Thus one reflects that everyone's action determines his or her own fate and destiny, that whatever befalls him or her they have brought it upon themselves and that only they themselves can alter their fate and destiny. As regards the mode of mutual conduct in society the Buddhist also uses the term *Upekkhā* to explain the virtue of impartiality in the sense of just, fair or righteous treatment and in this manner it is closely related to its other above mentioned aspects and to the first three virtues already discussed. Social life is a matter of interdependence, implying a process of living according to the principle of what we would call reciprocal altruism or social relationship.

### Conclusion

Above Four Cardinal Virtues are the essence of moral codes of Myanmar Culture; it covers directly or indirectly all good deeds of Myanmar, such as moral codes of individual person, that of the class or the role and that of the whole society. Whatever good actions may be it cannot be independent to Four Cardinal Virtue; they include in every good deed of people. It means that a good action cannot occur without *Mettā* or *Karunā* or *Muditā* or *Upekkhā*; a certain good deed may relate one or all these four cardinal virtue some things or other. Among Four Cardinal Virtue of *Mettā*, *Karunā*, *Muditā*, and *Upekkhā*, *Mettā* is the chief; it overwhelms the others and it has been emphasized in Buddhism.

According to Ashin Thittila, in his book *Essential Themes of Buddhist Lectures* described as, "Out of the four *Brahma Vihara*— this *Mettā*— which is one of them is good enough to create anything noble, anything grand to make peace and happiness at home, in society and in the world. *Mettā*— pure loving-kindness— embraces all beings everywhere. It also embraces all beings high or low, without measure because the poor people, lowly people, evil people ignorant people are most in need of it..." *Mettā* has a cooling effect like the soft touch of a gentle hand— soft but firm— without changing its sympathy and others. The Buddha has chosen the word for *Mettā* "love of a mother". He says in the *Mettā Sutta*: 'just as a mother, even at the risk of her life loves and protects her child— the only child— so let a man cultivate this Universal Love— towards the whole universe; below, above, around, unstinted, unmixed with any feeling of opposing interest. Let him remain steadfastly in this state of mind, all the while from the time he awakes, whether he be standing, walking, sitting or lying down. This state of heart is the best in the world'.<sup>1</sup>

Buddha Himself peacefully and calmly got victories over His great opponents by setting *Mettā* in mind; for example, The Buddha wined the challenge of the *mam-nat* who attacked Him with the help of the *meissas* companions to capture Buddha's sitting throne; and also, the fearful giant, *Alarvaka*; the wild big elephant, *Narragiri*; The wicked woman, *Zeinzarmarna*; fault-minded hermit, *Pissaka*; the villain *Engulimarla*; the great, powerful *Naghar*, *Pannandawpananda*; and the mal-view-minded *Paka Brahma*, etc. and there were so many *Jattakas* which showed *Mettā*-minded persons gained the various obstacles.

Without *Mettā* we cannot culture other three virtues in our mind; without *Mettā* they cannot accompany. The current of *Mettā* is following beneath other virtues of *Karunā*, *Muditā* and *Upekkhā*. Thus, we can say that Loving-kindness or *Mettā* is the chief, the key, the primary, the most important, the most essential virtue in Myanmar Buddhist Ethics.

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<sup>1</sup> Essential Themes of Buddhist Lectures. p 84.

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