

DUTY AND COMPASSION: THERAVĀDA BUDDHIST APPROACH TO HARMONIOUS FAMILIES, HEALTH CARE AND SUSTAINABLE SOCIETIES

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ABSTRACT

Duty and compassion are essential virtues for all human beings who are social members and want to live happily and peacefully in their societies. In order to secure happiness and peace of one's life, Buddhist teachings provide a social member with some guidances for harmonious families, health care and sustainable societies in which everyone can be physically and spiritually developed. Some Buddhist principles and practices are mentioned as examples. In addition, the cases of sustainable lives and happiness of people in Thailand are mentioned as examples of the accomplishment of Buddhist lives in a sustainable society.

1. INTRODUCTION

Duty and compassion are two distinguished virtues of “a good person” in Buddhist perspectives which essentially support harmonious families, health care and sustainable societies. While “duty” is a social or moral obligation one is obliged to do, “compassion” is a spiritual consciousness naturally existing and

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arising in human mind. Here, Theravada Buddhist perspectives will be shown to illustrate the points. In the *Dhammapada* of the Buddhist Scriptures, a good person (sappurisa) is a good friend who considers his/her duty of protecting his/her friend with compassion. Since the good and wise person sees one's faults and declares what is blameworthy, one should associate with him/her since s/he is sincere and give one the chance to do better (Harvey, ed. 2018, p. 301). A good person is wise and always for the better. If s/he sees our faults, s/he will sincerely tell us. S/he is thus like a revealer of treasures who is worth our association. Besides, the monastic life depends wholly on having supportive companions and friendly advisers or teachers (kalyāna-mitta or "good friend") in the sense of virtuous and wise spiritual friends with the Buddha as the greatest of these.

Throughout the Buddha's teachings in the *Dhammapada* one can see that 'a good person' is the wise one. S/he is wise and clearly know what is good or bad because s/he has spent a long time in studying and practising the dhamma. Since s/he is knowledgeable, s/he properly understands the world, stays in peace and harms no one. Moreover, s/he is free from all evil deeds and self-attachment and always yields proper benefits to others. Those who are friends of a good person are thus accordingly good. On the contrary, those who are ignorant cannot differentiate good from evil. They are somehow led to do evil and thus have to reap the fruits of their bad deeds.

In the seven distinguishing qualities (sappurisadhamma) of a virtuous person, the Buddha preaches, for example, the qualities of knowledge on essential principles and causes and on objectives and effects. Those who possess qualities of knowledge on essential principles and causes (dhammaññutā) know essential principles and causes of the laws of nature. Besides, they know essential teachings, guidelines, and responsibilities which are causes for successful and effective actions toward their goals. This knowledge initiates the sense of duty. For examples, a monk knows the Buddha's teachings very well that he must study and practice; a ruler knows the righteous principles of leadership and governance. Moreover, those who possess qualities of knowledge on objectives and effects (atthaññutā) thoroughly know objectives and effects. They know

the meaning and purpose of specific teachings, codes of practice, and duties. In other words, they know the desired fruit of specific actions. For example, a disciple know the meaning and purpose of whatever he studies and practises including the good of the goal in his life (Payutto, 2017, p.1026). In theravada Buddhist tradition, the Arahants or the Buddhist saints are exemplars of those who are perfected with duty and compassion since they are free from all defilements and devote themselves for the good of others.

In the Thai context, the late king Rāma IX or King Bhumibol Adulyadej also promoted the virtues of duty and compassion. He told the Thai people to keep doing their duty and to try to accomplish their assigned duties. He urged everyone to do their duty for duty's sake in order to accomplish the virtues of being human. Being a good person, according to the King, would yield wisdom to himself/herself and the prosperity of his life and his country. (*Ministry of Culture*, 2005, p.41) Besides, he urged all Thais to be compassionate toward one another through living with sufficient economy. Through the way of sufficient economy, each one should be compassionate to the other. S/he needed to be less egoistic and more generous to others. He explained that when one felt the limit of sufficiency, one did not want to have more than one really needed. One did not want to take advantage of others. Thus, the knowledge of sufficiency is necessary to cultivate compassion toward others (*The National Research Committee of Economy of Thailand*, 2003, p.19)

2. DUTY AND COMPASSION AS MEANS OF HARMONIOUS FAMILIES

Duty and compassion provide a peaceful and harmonious family which flourishes in happiness and benefits of life. The practices of duty and compassion in Buddhism are dhammic practices for the harmony of our benefits and those of others. These practices can be realized through the leadership of wisdom. According to the Buddha's teachings, the benefits of the dhammic practices, e.g., giving things to the needy and saving one's life, are spiritual rather than material gains. These spiritual gains may become causes of virtues, happiness, and the end of suffering of practitioners.

There are many of the Buddha's teachings concerning means

of harmonious families in the Buddhist Scriptures. Some sets of teachings can be mentioned here as examples:

- The four principles for leading the household life (**gharāvāsa-dhamma**).
- The four causes for a family's prosperity and longevity (**kula-ciraṭṭhiti-dhamma**).

The teaching of four principles for leading the household life is in the Tipitaka (S.I. 215) and explained by Venerable P.A. Payutto (the present monastic rank is Somdet Phra Buddhaghosacariya) as the teaching for the sustainable household life of a couple. The couple who want to live together peacefully for long need to follow this dhamma:

- **Sacca** (truthfulness) is truthful and faithful to each other in thoughts, speech and deeds.
- **Dama** (training) is the exercise of restraint, training of oneself to correct faults, resolution of differences, adaptation to each other and improvement of oneself.
- **Khanti** (patience) is to be firm, stable and patient with each other. The couple need to endure difficulties and hardship in order to overcome obstacles together.
- **Cāga** (sacrifice) is to be thoughtful and be able to do for the sake of the partner. For example, one may sacrifice his/her good sleep in order to look after his/her partner who is sick (Payutto, 2008, p.54).

The four causes for a family's prosperity and longevity, on the other hand, are for the head of a family. They are known as the four **Kula-ciraṭṭhiti-dhamma** in the *Anguttara-nikayā*. II. 249 of the Tipitaka. The head of a family who wants to sustain his/her family needs to wisely do the mission as follows:

- **Naṭṭha-gavesanā** (recovery). When things are lost or used up, s/he recovers them.
- **Jiṇṇa-pāṭisaṅkharāṇā** (repair). When things are old and damaged, s/he restores and repairs them.
- **Parimita-pānabhojanā** (moderation). S/he is moderate in his/her eating and using.

- **Adhipacca-sīlavanta-thāpanā** (right appointment). S/he puts the right one on the right job. S/he places the good and capable one in charge of the household. (Payutto, 2008, p.56).

A harmonious family can exist because the head of the family and family members wisely understand their roles, are committed to their duties and treat one another with compassion. Whenever our minds are pure and free from evil, we will be conscious of others' problems and better understand them. Compassion thus well arises in an undisturbed mind. One can say that the Buddha and the Arahants (Buddhist saints) possess the highest level of compassion because their minds are free from all defilements and are thus best conscious of others' sufferings. That's why they play many significant roles in helping all the miserable.

3. DUTY AND COMPASSION FOR THE SUPPORT OF HEALTH CARE

Health care is an essential duty of all living beings, especially of human beings. Health is the most precious property of life and a potential strength of creativity and production. A good health yields happiness and success to its owner. For example, if we are ill, we cannot do the best of our jobs. Similarly, when we have a poor health, we can neither do our work nor earn our living which finally either lead us to trouble and failure in our lives.

Through wisdom, we understand that human beings are composed of natural elements which are subject to change and to which are not worth clinging. Besides, wisdom reveals to us the Law of Cause and Effect which remind us to manage with the cause in order to gain the satisfying effect. Since human beings are composed of body and mind which relate to each other, they are thus the cause of well-being and deterioration of each other as well. Generally, Buddhist teachings guide ways of living simply, keeping a good health, keeping oneself physically and mentally clean, and staying in a good environment for the sake of one's own self and others. We are able to gain the knowledge of this principle through wisdom.

Through our cultivation of the senses of duty and compassion, we learn to maintain our good health by means of keeping our four body elements in balance, e.g. right eating and right living.

Moreover, we should keep our minds in balance through right thought and meditation practice. Buddhist meditation is aimed at the attainment of spiritual health and mental health. As to the spiritual health, meditation yields wisdom which is useful for both the development of our daily lives and the attainment of the ultimate peace (Payutto, 19997, p. 153).

Apart from cultivating self-knowledge, Buddhist teachings also encourage altruistic attitude toward others. Particularly, the virtues of loving kindness and compassion are emphasized in the practices for health care. Medical doctors and nurses, thus, should be with loving kindness and compassion in order to support the patient against their illness and initiate their cooperation in the process of healing.

In Thai medical principle, keeping oneself in good health is better than having a good medical care. Health maintenance can be attained through keeping the four body elements, i.e. earth, water, fire, and air, in balance by means of right eating and right living. For example, in Thailand, it is believed that if a person has a bad digestion, s/he needs to improve his/her Fire Element in the stomach. S/he should eat hot food and “hot” vegetable such as ginger, chilli, and so on. On the contrary, if s/he has a high fever which is believed to be caused by too much Fire Element in the body, s/he should avoid eating food of high calorie, e.g. sticky rice, durian, and so on (Ratarasarn, 1989, pp. 261-265).

Apart from keeping the body elements in balance, a person should also keep his/her mental balance. The art of health maintenance is based on the Buddhist assumption that the strong mind can support the body through its difficulties. In the **Vinaya**, the Monastic Rules in the Buddhist Scriptures, one can find the Buddhist methods of holistic treatment. For example, a medical doctor or care assistant should take care of both physical and mental conditions of a patient. The Vinaya reflects the good qualities of a successful medical doctor and a hopeful patient as follows: A medical doctor’s good qualities are 1) being able to prepare proper medicine 2) knowing the suitable food for a patient and being able to prepare it properly 3) taking care of a patient with loving kindness and compassion without greed for more gain. 4) being willing to serve a patient without disgusting his/her

excrement and so on 5) being able to persuade a patient to follow the suggestion and to encourage a patient to fight against his/her illness. Similarly, a patient's good qualities are 1) being ready to take things easy 2) being moderate in life style 3) being willing to take medicine 4) being truthful to the medical doctor or care assistant as to his/her illness 5) being patient with his/her physical pain (Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalaya university, Vol. 5, 1996, pp. 239-243)

Both medical doctors and patients need to cope with their treatment of illness through their senses of duty and compassion. A medical doctor should be with some ethical values, e.g. loving kindness, compassion and altruistic mind. A patient should take his/her duty to follow the guidance of his/her medical doctor in order to be recover from his/her illness in due time.

4. DUTY AND COMPASSION FOR THE REALIZATION OF SUSTAINABLE SOCIETIES

In order to live happily and be able to survive by one's our self, one needs to follow the Principles of Right Livelihood. Right Livelihood is a Path toward "The End of Suffering" in human lives. The main purpose of earning a good living in a society is to have an adequate amount of the four requisites, i.e. lodging, clothing, food, and medication. The Buddha's teachings do not encourage an abundance of material wealth which lures people to more material possessions. This principle of sufficiency can be seen in the Buddha's teaching of the good or proper governance.

In Kūtadanta Sutta, the Buddha preached the right method of sacrifice in order to obtain utility and happiness. The Sutta narrated that Kutadanta Brahmin advised King Mahā-vijita to improve the economic situation in his country by supporting all necessities of the people, e.g. providing both thieves and the people in his country with food seeds to grow in the field and supporting all civil servants with food and wages. Having done this, the royal property would increase. Thieves and rebels would disappear from the country. All people would feel secure and live happily at home. This principle of sufficiency is included as one of responsibilities of a king. The success of a ruler's work should be measured not by a full treasury

or abundant wealth but by the absence of poverty in society (Dīghanikāya. III.61 in Payutto, 2017, pp. 1250-1251).

In Thailand, His Majesty the late King Bhumibol Adulyadej or the Ninth King of this Dynasty had done much work on the principle of sufficiency. Especially, his theory of Sufficient Economy is primarily based on the Buddhist teaching of self-reliance and a moderate life. This theory was first introduced by His Majesty of his people in order to solve the problems of poverty, morality and environments in Thailand in 1974 when he gave his royal speech on the occasion of the Commencement of Kasetsart University Students. He emphasized that the development of the country should follow a step-by-step plan. It should first provide the people with self-sufficiency by means of an economical way of life and proper management. Then it could proceed to a higher step of economic success and social prosperity (Sirikanchana, 2012, p. 16). Sufficient economy promotes self-reliance. A person who is economically secure can survive and help others. It is the Buddhist way of life which promotes the Middle Path as an overriding principle for appropriate conduct by the populace at all levels. It is a holistic concept of moderation and contentment which can be applied to all conducts in family, community, and nation. Self-sufficiency enables self-reliance. It strengthens economic stability of an individual in order to live harmoniously with his/her natural environment. The Buddha's teachings in the Tipitaka suggest the Buddhists to divide their income into 4 parts. One part is for supporting themselves, their dependents and for good causes. Two parts are for investments. The last part is for saving for future needs (Payutto, 2008, p. 41). Sufficient economy encourages all human beings to attain sustainable happiness which are as follows:

- Happiness of possessing one's property which is the outcome of one's own effort and moral conduct
- Happiness of spending one's property for the sake of one's own self, one's own family, the needy and the public welfare
- Happiness of freedom from debt
- Happiness of blameless conduct (Payutto, 2008, p. 44).

This Theory was recommended by the United Nation (UN)

which honoured his Majesty the King with the Human Development Lifetime Achievement Award in May 26, 2006. In the UN Lecture in honor of him, the Theory of Sufficient Economy was praised as a worthy theory for Thailand and all nations.

5. CONCLUSION

Duty and compassion are essential virtues of all human beings and particularly emphasized in the Buddhist teachings. They support a higher level of dhammic practices based on the development of wisdom and the attainment of final liberation. Consciousness of duty and sense of compassion encourages us to live with other beings and the world of nature in harmony in order to share peace and happiness with one another. Through duty and compassion, we can develop our public mind and share responsibility of human beings, societies, and the world of nature. We are thus enjoy being with our environments and can live with others happily, creatively, and harmoniously.

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