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The Concept of Moral Duty of Thingaza Sayadaw

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Abstract

Duty means what a person is obligated or required to do. Duty may be moral, legal, parental, occupational, etc, depending on their foundations or grounds. In ethics, duty is commonly associated with conscience, reason, rightness, moral law and virtue.

In this paper Thingaza Sayadaw's view on duty will be examined and discussed. The problem of this paper is to show whether his moral duty is applicable, important and necessary or not in individual life and social life at present age. If one performs these duties, one is morally good. Moreover his moral duty is necessary and advantageous for the development of moral life. So, his moral duty is applicable and important in daily life to improve both individual life and social life.

Introduction

Eastern people believe that culture and ethics are intimately related. Ethics is one of the essential themes in the development of culture. Ethics emphasizes the principles governing human action in terms of their goodness, badness, rightness and wrongness. Ethical terms such as "good", "bad", "right", "wrong", "justice", "unjustice" and the term "duty" play important roles in the field of ethics. But what criteria should be used to define them? Some say "Duty" is the only criterion for morality. There are various kinds of duties which human being must carry out such as moral, parental and occupational and if one fulfills these duties, then one's conduct is moral.

In studying the concept of duty, it has been found that there are many kinds of duties and responsibilities, such as social duty, religious duty, moral duty, family duty, duty in job or work. So, all persons living in society have some responsibility or others. Whether one wishes to or not each person has obligations and duties in society according to the position he or she occupies. Some are unwilling to do their individual or social duties. They try to deny the fact that they are responsible. If a person fails to do his duty or fulfill a promise made many times, he will soon encounter unpleasant events. Sometimes they lose good opportunities for advancement. A person, therefore, should be dutiful at home, at work, in business, in social and religious life.

In Eastern thought, the Bhagavadgītā, an ancient Indian epic involves duty ethics. Likewise Confucian ethics is also said to be a kind of duty ethics. They stressed duty rather than consequence in moral action. Thingaza Sayadaw, a Myanmar Buddhist Scholar also wrote various guides to ethics based on Theravāda Buddhist views. They can be regarded as duty ethics because it prescribes social duties and obligations for Myanmar society.

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The above mentioned views are directly concerned with duty ethics. In this way, it comes to understand that duty ethics is important and it can also contribute for the development of spiritual and moral characters.

Aim and Objective

The purpose of this paper is to show that duty ethics is important in society. Thingaza Sayadaw view can be regarded as duty ethics because it prescribes social duties and obligation for Myanmar society. He has pointed fundamental moral duties to keep and observe practically for improvement of individual lives. The aim of his duty is to provide the development of moral and spiritual dignity of human beings.

1. Moral Duty in Thingaza Sayadaw's View

Rules of conduct and duty can be studied in the verses of Thingaza Sayadaw. When we study these verses, duty ethics is obviously found in it. In his verses, duties to be performed by each member of the society are mentioned.

Before explaining Thingaza Sayadaw's view on Duty, it is first of all necessary to present the definition and different kinds of duty.

1.1. Definition of Duty

The concept of duty, is defined in the Advanced Learner's Dictionary of Philosophy as follows:

"Duty is derived from Latin *debere* ('to owe'). The sense of duty vies with that of "good" or "value" for the honour of serving as the foundation conception of ethics. Ethical systems taking "duty" as basic are called "formalistic" or "deontological" rather than "teleological" or "axiological".¹

The word "Duty" means what one ought morally or legally to do, an action or task requiring to be done. In moral philosophy, the connection between law and duty is important. The meaning of duty defined in Dictionary of Philosophy as follows:

"Whatever is necessary or required or whatever one is morally obliged to do, as opposed to what one may be pleased or inclined to do. Also the moral obligation itself and the law or principle in which it is expressed." In ethics duty is commonly associated with conscience, reason, rightness, moral law and virtue.²

There are moral duties (social duties) for all human beings in Myanmar Culture. In Myanmar Society, duty is the most important and significant concept for all mankind. So, the Myanmar moral term duty refers to good character (good qualities) for all human beings.

In Myanmar society, the term *Wú*, *Wú ta jā* can be found as one of the key concepts of the development of Myanmar society. In the Myanmar-English Dictionary, which expresses as follows:

"*Wú*, '*Wú ta jā*' and '*tā wun*' are translated as duty."³

Concerning the term '*Wú*', *U Nānā Dicca* said that –

¹ Advanced Learner's Dictionary of Philosophy - 103

² Dictionary of Philosophy - 85

³ Myanmar English Dictionary - 166, 480

"The term 'Wú' such as *mi-ba 'Wú'*, *p hsaja 'Wú'* in *Singala Sutta* is translated as duty."¹

So, the Myanmar views on "Duties" can be found in the verses of *Thingaza Sayadaw*. These duties will be discussed in 1.3 under the title of Thingaza Sayadaw conception of Duty.

1.2. Different Kinds of Duty

There are many kinds of Duties such as moral, legal, social and occupational depending on the role or position of a person in society. For instance, a person may be a parent or a teacher. If so, that person has several duties to fulfill. Some can be regarded as both moral and legal at the same time. There are different types of Duties which are natural duties, negative duties, imperfect duties. In the "Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy" natural duties are described as follows:

Natural duties are moral duties, people have simply in virtue of being persons i.e., simply in virtue of their nature. There is a prima facie duty to do something if and only if there is an appropriate basis for doing that thing. For instance, a prima facie moral duty will be one for which there is a moral basis i.e. some moral grounds."²

Therefore, natural duties are moral duties which people have to do in virtue of the nature of the role they have in society. Negative duties and positive duties are also defined in "Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy" as follows:

"Negative duties are duties not to do certain things such as to kill or harm, while positive duties are duties to act in certain ways, such as to relieve suffering or bring aid. While the question of precisely how to draw the distinction between negative and positive duties is disputed, it is generally thought that the violation of a negative duty involves an agent's causing some state of affairs that is the basis of the actions wrongness, whereas the violation of a positive duty involves an agent's allowing these states of affairs to occur or be brought about."³

Imperfect duties and perfect duties are also defined in Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy as follows:

"Imperfect duties are, in Kant's words "duties" which allow leeway in the interest of inclination i.e. that permit one to choose among several possible ways of fulfilling them. Perfect duties do not allow that leeway. Thus the duty to help those in need is an imperfect duty since it can be filled by helping the sick, the starving, the oppressed etc. and if one chooses to help, say the sick, one can choose which of the sick to help. However, the duty to keep one's promise and the duty not to harm others are perfect duties since they do not allow one to choose which promises to keep or which people not to harm. Most positive duties are imperfect, most negative ones perfect."⁴

Therefore imperfect duties are those which a person has to choose which one has to be fulfilled. Perfect duties are those which do not allow one to choose.

¹ Thirty-eight Blessings - 140

² The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy - 213

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

1.3. Thingaza Sayadaw's Conception of Duty

In Myanmar society, "Duty" is the most important and significant concept. In Myanmar tradition duty determines moral character.

Since the time of ancient Myanmar monarchs, various kinds of duty were prescribed in stone inscriptions supported by other archaeological and historical evidences.

The philosophical thoughts of duty can be found in the verses of *Thingaza Sayadaw*. In his verses the various kinds of "Duty" are given. They are as follows:

- (1) Duties for Parents,
- (2) Duties for Sons and Daughters,
- (3) Duties for Teachers,
- (4) Duties for Students,
- (5) Duties for a Husband,
- (6) Duties for a Wife,
- (7) Duties for Friends,
- (8) Duties for Good Masters,
- (9) Duties for Servants and Employees,

(1) Duties for Parents

According to *Thingaza Sayadaw*, duties for parents are as follows:

- (1) They restrain their children from evil,
- (2) Encourage them to good.
- (3) Give them educational and professional training.
- (4) Arrange suitable marriages for them and
- (5) Hand over property as inheritance to them at the proper time.

(2) Duties for Sons and Daughters

In the verses of *Thingaza Sayadaw*, five duties for sons and daughters are prescribed as follows:

- (1) Support the parents in turn,
- (2) Manage affairs on their behalf,
- (3) Maintain the honour and tradition of the family,
- (4) Make yourself worthy of the inheritance and
- (5) Offer alms on behalf of departed parents.

The above social duties for "parents" and duties for "sons and daughters" are reflect the social relationship of Myanmar culture.

The ethical views in the verses of the Thingaza Sayadaw are based on the Teachings of the Buddha. The Buddha realized that the family unit makes up society and society will be peaceful and secure only if the family units that make up society are stable. And for the stability of the family each member must carry out his assigned duties willingly and faithfully.

This is also true of other social relationships such as that between ruler and ruled, teacher and pupil and even between the monks and laymen. So 'duty' is the essence and foundation of morality in mundane life as well as the religious order of monks.

(3) Duties for Teachers

According to the *Thingaza Sayadaw*, five duties for teachers are laid down as follows:

- (1) The teacher teaches the pupils well,
- (2) Teachers guide the pupils to lead a good life,
- (3) Teachers train pupils in all the arts and sciences,
- (4) Contrasts the pupil to his friends and associates and
- (5) Provides protection

The above five duties are the essence of "a good teacher".

(4) Duties for Students

According to *Thingaza Sayadaw*, there are five duties to be followed by students. They are mentioned as follows:

- (1) To greet and salute the teacher,
- (2) To serve the teacher,
- (3) To obey the teacher,
- (4) To offer personal service to the teacher and
- (5) To learn and receive the teacher's instructions with respectful attention.

Only if a student carries out these duties faithfully, can he be termed a good student.

(5) Duties for a Husband

According to *Thingaza Sayadaw*, there are five duties for a husband in relation to his wife. They are as follows:

- (1) Being courteous,
- (2) Paying respect to each other,
- (3) Being faithful to her,
- (4) Giving her control and authority over domestic matters, and
- (5) Providing her with clothing and ornaments.

(6) Duties for a Wife

The five duties for a wife are as follows:

- (1) She discharges well her various duties,
- (2) She is hospitable and generous,
- (3) She is faithful to her husband,
- (4) Manages the household well, and
- (5) Skilled and industrious in her wifely duties

In *Thingaza Sayadaw's* verse, the meaning of "Friendship", "Good Master" and "Good Servants" are determined by how they do their assigned duties.

(7) Duties for Friends

The duties for the friend are as follows:

- (1) Giving generously,
- (2) Being pleasant and courteous speech,
- (3) Being helpful,
- (4) Treating others as he treats himself.
- (5) Being true to his words and promise

(8) Duties for Good Masters

The duties for the good master are as follows:

- (1) To give them food and remuneration,
- (2) To assign work suitably,
- (3) To look after them in sickness.
- (4) To share with them choice food.
- (5) To guard them leave at times.

(9) Duties for Servants and Employees

The duties for the servants and employees are as follows:

- (1) To wake up before the employer
- (2) To sleep after him
- (3) To take only what is given
- (4) To perform their duties well
- (5) To uphold his good name and fame.

The above are the various kinds of duty expressed by *Thingaza Sayadaw*. These are Socio-ethical duties and complementary duties. If one performs these duties, one is morally good.

One of the characteristics of Myanmar conception of duty is that there is reciprocity which exists between parents and children, teachers and students, husband and wife, master and employee. Duties to be fulfilled are reciprocal and a kind of social contract based mainly on love.

Conclusion

Thingaza Sayadaw's duty ethics is more helpful and useful for human beings to solve our daily life problems and social life problems. So, it can be concluded that his duty is still applicable. It can contribute to improve personal morality and social morality.

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