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Author	Dr Win Maung
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## The Significant Role of *Saddhā* in *Theravāda* Buddhist Thought

Win Maung

### Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to show the significant role of *Saddhā* in *Theravāda* Buddhist Thought. The word *saddhā* means faith, belief, confidence, conviction. *Saddhā* is neither mind nor matter. It is good mental property, *cetasika*. In *Theravāda* Buddhist literatures Buddha Himself taught that *saddhā* is the noblest quality of a man by which the circle of rebirth can be overcome and it is the best attitude to acquire knowledge. According to *Theravāda* Buddhism, *Saddhā*, as a great strength, can destroy and eradicate opposition. The role of faith can be found obviously in other non-Buddhist thoughts. It is also used widely in religion, politics, economics and sociology. *Saddhā*, faith, therefore, plays a vital role in life and society. In this paper, the meaning and nature of *saddhā*, its kinds, its role, its necessity and insufficiency etc, will be described.

**Key words:** *Saddhā*, *Theravāda* Buddhism

### Introduction

#### **Saddhā and Theravāda Buddhist Thought**

In *Theravāda* Buddhist thought *Saddhā* plays an important role as in other religions. According to the Buddha's doctrine, *Saddhā* (faith) is the noblest quality of man by which the circle of rebirth can be overcome. It is a necessary factor to acquire knowledge. *Saddhā* as a great power can suppress all oppositions. *Saddhā* is thus useful both in mundane and supermundane. The concept of *saddhā* is used deeply in Myanmar Buddhist society. All true Myanmar Buddhists believe in the Three Gems, theory of moral actions, the advantages of alms giving, the past, the present and future life, the merit and demerit, the benefit and care of parents, deliverance, and the power of mind etc. *Saddhā*, thus, is important in Myanmar Buddhists life, religion, thought and culture. Other non-Buddhist also widely accept the concept of faith. But *Saddhā*, and faiths in the other systems are radically different. In this paper, the significant role of *Saddhā* in *Theravāda* Buddhist thought will be described. *Saddhā*, like effort, wisdom and concentration, therefore, plays an important role in Myanmar *Theravāda* Buddhist thought and culture.

## 1. The Meaning and Nature of *Saddhā*

*Saddhā* plays an important role in Myanmar *Theravāda* Buddhist thought and culture. *Saddhā* is a kind of faith or belief but it differs from the meaning of faith as interpreted in non-Buddhist thought. It has distinctive characters. The term *saddhā* has occupied a vital role in *Theravāda* Buddhism and Myanmar culture.

*Saddhā* is a Pāli word meaning ဝံကြည်မှု in Myanmar. The closest meaning in English would be confidence or conviction. *Saddhā* is sometimes translated as belief or faith. *Saddhā* means faith in what ought to be believed. In fact the words belief and faith are used more in non-Buddhist religions, such as, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Judaism and other different kinds of religions. *Saddhā* as understood by Myanmar Buddhists, is different from such belief or faith which is mentioned in other religions in which God or Supernatural Being is taken as the object of faith and worship. Though there are some different points among non-Buddhist systems, there is a similarity or likeness that God is obviously accounted as creator, sustainer, controller, destroyer of the world. God is also assumed as saviour of everything. All adherents in those systems believe totally in God.

The concept of *Saddhā* and faith or belief in God is radically different. The nature of *saddhā* in Buddhist thought is explained by Venerable Ashin Thittila as follows:

Buddhism does not demand blind faith from its adherents: here mere faith is dethroned and replaced by confidence, *saddhā* as it is known in Pāli, based on knowledge of truth. The confidence placed by a follower in the Buddha is like that of a sick man towards the physician or that of a student toward his teacher. A Buddhist seeks refuge in the Buddha because it is he who discovered the path of deliverance. A sick man should use the remedy which the physician prescribes in order to be cured, and the pupil should study what his teacher says in order to become learned. In just the same way, a Buddhist who possesses *saddhā* should also follow the Buddha's instructions in order to gain deliverance. (Thittila, 2000)

We should therefore note that the usage of *saddhā* is not the same as that of belief or faith in other religions, so it is more meaningful and significant than belief or faith in non-Buddhist systems. According to Nyanatiloka,

*Saddhā*, Faith, Confidence: A Buddhist is said to have faith if he believes in the Perfect One's (The Buddha) enlightenment or in the three Jewels, by taking his refuge to them. His faith, however, should be reasoned and rooted in understanding and his faith. A Buddhist's faith is not in conflict with the spirit of inquiry, and doubt about dubitable things is admitted and inquiry into them is encouraged. (Nyanatiloka, 2003)

According to the above explanation, the concept of *saddhā* accepted by Myanmar *Theravāda* Buddhism is based on reason and understanding. There is no room for doubt, unseen things in it. So it is more realistic than the other definitions of faith.

## 2. *Saddhā* is a Type of Mental Property

In the Buddhist theory of ultimate reality, mind, *citta*, and mental factors, *cetasikas*, are inseparable. A mental property is neither matter nor is it mind, consciousness. It depends on mind but it leads and determines the mind. There are fifty-two kinds of mental property. These fifty-two kinds of mental properties can be classified into three groups; wholesome mental properties, unwholesome mental properties and mental properties that are associated with good and bad consciousness. Of the wholesome mental properties, *saddhā* is one of them. It is like mindfulness, moral shame and moral fear.

*Saddhā* as a good mental property, thus, has good influence on the mind. It enhances the mind to be pure and wholesome.

## 3. Genuine *Saddhā* and Non-Genuine *Saddhā*

There is no explanation of real faith and false faith in other systems. In *Theravāda* Buddhism, however, there are exact principles to distinguish real *saddhā* from unreal *saddhā*. According to Myanmar *Theravāda Buddhist*, *saddhā*, which gives clarity, peace and tranquillity, happiness of mind for the devotees is genuine *saddhā* or reliable *saddhā*. Among many objects of *saddhā*, the Three Gems are said to be the most reliable and convictional. By studying the true nature of the Three Gems or the attributes of the Three Gems, the *Buddha*, *Dhamma* and *Samgha* can be realized clearly.

There are the Nine Attributes of the Buddha, the Six Attributes of the *Dhamma* and the Nine Attributes of the *Samgha* which are described in Buddhist Scriptures. Whenever we pay respects to Buddha and concentrate on His nobility in our mind we fix on these exalted attributes.



The Noble Teaching of the Exalted Buddha is known as the *Dhamma* in the Three Gems. If we pay homage to it, we shall benefit in this life as well as in the next life. The devotees, who pay respects and homage to the attributes of The *Samgha*, will be protected from danger and harm and will gain all benefits in life. A devotee should pay homage to the Three Gems. It gives many benefits for the present life and the life after death. They also prevent and destroy suffering, danger and harm to devotees and eventually bring clarity and peace of mind of devotees.

Besides, there are other reliable and truth worthy things which have existed in our inner being. They are *kamma* and its results, meritorious deeds and the wholesome mental factors.

*Kamma* is a Pāli term meaning action, (Volitional action). In the Teaching of the Buddha (Higher Level-Volume 1), the nature of *Kamma* is explained as follows. *Cetanā* (Volition) is the main source of *kamma*. The word *cetanā* is a special term in Buddhism, the definite meaning of which cannot be rendered into any other language. *Cetanā* is the main cause of every action bodily or verbal or mental which may be good or bad. Nothing can be accomplished without *cetanā*. *Cetanā* is called the action or *kamma* by the Buddha. Thus we should believe in the theory of *kamma* as we believe in the Three Gems.

In Buddhist thought, the ten meritorious deeds bring all types of happiness and prosperity for devotees. These good deeds are:

1. Charity, 2. Morality, 3. Meditation, 4. Reverence to worthy persons
5. Helping in the service of good deeds of others, 6. Sharing of merit, 7. Rejoicing at the merit of others, 8. Listening the teaching, 9. Teaching the Doctrine and, 10. Nurturing right views.

The above ten good deeds are believed as reliable *saddhā*. Among the fifty-two kinds of mental properties, the following are wholesome mental properties (or) mental factors.

1. Confidence, 2. Mindfulness, 3. Moral Shame, 4. Moral fear, 5. Generosity,
6. Non-hatred, 7. Non-delusion, 8. Loving-Kindness, 9. Compassion, 10. Sympathetic joy, 11. Equanimity, 12. Right speech, 13. Right action, 14. Right livelihood.

These mental properties develop the mind to be pure and wholesome. Therefore we should put complete trust in our mental factors.

The above mental volitional actions (*kamma*) of good deeds and wholesome mental factors can be cultivated, exercised, tamed and controlled. They can be regarded as real or genuine *saddhā* in Myanmar Buddhist society.

On the other hand, *saddhā* which yields to more defilements, such as, greed, hatred, conceit etc, is regarded as not genuine *saddhā*. Such *saddhā* cannot give purity and peace of mind because it is mixed with mind-defiling factors or defilements. Ten kinds of defilements are as follows:

1. Greed, 2. Hatred, 3. Bewilderment, 4. Conceit, 5. Wrong view, 6. Doubt, 7. Mental torpor, 8. Restlessness, 9. Not ashamed to do evil and, 10. Not fearing to do evil.

There are many doctrines, theories, isms, views, of politics, economics and sociology in the world, for example, Existentialism, Pragmatism, Realism, Materialism in philosophy, Capitalism, Marxism, Fascism, Socialism, etc. in politics. Each view may be right within the limitation of time and place for those who believe it. But it may be false or unsuitable for other groups in different situations and conditions. They are not absolute truths. They are mixed with and based on the above mentioned mental defilements, personal bias, prejudice, selfishness, and individual interests. They have no strength or power to give purity, clarity and peace of mind for a long time. They lead to confusion and doubt in the mind of human-beings. They are not reliable and believable. They cannot, therefore, be regarded as real *saddhā* in Myanmar Buddhist thought. In this way, real *saddhā* can be distinguished from non-real *saddhā* from the stand point of *Theravadā* Buddhism.

#### 4. Virtue of *Saddhā*

Things, which are regarded to be precious in many ways, are counted as gems. According to Venerable Thitagu Sayadaw, there are three categories of gem or jewellery; in Myanmar Buddhist society.

1. The Three Gems, the Buddha, the *Dhamma* and the *Samgha*
2. The seven Gems
3. One's Children, elephants and horses.

In the second category, there are seven kinds of precious gems:

1. Gold, 2. Silver, 3. Ruby, 4. Pearl, 5. Cat's eye, 6. Diamond and, 7. Coral

Among these seven kinds of precious gems, *saddhā* is comparable with the precious ruby which has certain powers.

1. When a ruby is put in a water pot, it brings sediment to the surface.
2. It cleans the dust on the surface of water and
3. It has the power to cool hot water.

Like the power of the ruby, *saddhā* also has some attributes for the mental purity. Some of these attributes are:

1. *Saddhā* can calm rough defilements
2. *Saddhā* can clean the hindrances or obstructions in the way for the achievement of mental absorption, insight, knowledge and fruition. There are six kinds of hindrances:

1. Sensual desire, 2. Ill will, 3. Sloth and torpor, 4. Restlessness and worry, 5. Doubt, 6. Ignorance of the "Noble Truths." *Saddhā* can bring mental happiness

The power of *saddhā* can remove worry, despair, anguish, grief, anxiety and confusion which originate in social affairs, political affairs and economic affairs in the daily life and bring mental peace and happiness.

In the story of *Patasārā*, *Buddha* delivered the sermon of heedfulness to *Patasārā* who grieved about her family's ruin. Heedfulness is the mental process of mindfulness. It is synonymous with mindfulness and the most vital factor in achieving merit. Because of the belief in the Buddha and His sermon, *Patasārā* was released from her grief. She became a famous *Bhikkhuni* in the Buddhist *sāsāna* and ultimately a famous Arahāt under the Buddha dispensation.

The above story obviously shows the benefit of the attribute of *saddhā*.

#### 4. Four Kinds of *Saddhā*

There are four kinds of *saddhā* which are described in Buddhist scriptures. They are as follows:

1. *Āgamasaddhā*
2. *Adhigamasaddhā*
3. *Okappanasaddhā*
4. *Pasādāsaddhā*

*Āgamasaddhā* is a firm conviction which is arisen in a *Bodhisatta* from the time of aspiring to become a Buddha.

*Adhigamsaddhā* is also a firm conviction of the Ariyas.

*Okappanasaddhā* is an unshakable conviction in the Three Gems; The Gem of the Buddha, the Gem of the *Dhamma* and the Gem of the *Samgha*.  
*Pasadāsaddhā* is clearness of conviction in the Three Gems.

*Āgamasaddhā* does not concern the laity. It is a conviction only for the *Bodhisattva*. Such strong belief is started in the heart of *Bodhisattva* who has received preordainment to become a Buddha from one of the preceding Buddhas. He has an aspiration to be a Buddha.

*Adhigamasaddhā* is concerned with an *Ariya* (noble one) who has eradicated some or all of the defilements, such as, greed, hatred, conceit, etc. There are four kinds or stages of *Ariya*, the *Sotāpana*, the *sakadagami*, the *anāgāmi* and the *Arahat*. The *sotāpana* who having reached the first stage of path-knowledge will attain the Ultimate Goal (*Nibbāna*) after having seven rebirths at the most. The *sakadagami* who having reached the second stage of path-knowledge, will be reincarnated only once as a human being before attainment of the supreme Buddhist goal. The *anāgāmi*, who has attained the third stage of path-knowledge, will be reborn only in the Fine-material Sphere or the Non-material sphere before realizing Ultimate liberation. The *Arahat* can eliminate all defilements.

He is ready to attain the *Nibbāna*. According to Venerable Chan Mwayt Sayadaw *Okkapanasaddhā* is for those who believe firmly in the Three Gems. Such kind of *saddhā* is based on intelligence. On the basis of intelligence, they understood the life of Buddha, His doctrines, His disciples, inner nature of Buddha, physical marks of Buddha, the nine virtues of the *Samgha*. They also realized that the unique virtues of the Buddha, the six virtues of the *Dhamma*, the nine virtues of *Samgha*. They also realized that the unique virtues of the Buddha imply essence of mundane and super mundane possessed by Him.

If, on the basis of intelligence, a person understands the virtue or attributes of Buddha, his or her belief is regarded as belief with intelligence. So also, on the basis of intelligence if he understands the virtues of both *Dhamma* and *Samgha*, his *saddhā* is regarded as the *saddhā* or belief with intelligence. Such kind of *saddhā* is known as *Okappanasaddhāi*.



*Pasādasaddhā*, the last and fourth kind, is concerned with common people, or sentient beings. It is a *saddhā* without intelligence, for he becomes a believer by simply hearing the voice or name of the Buddha, the *Dhamma*, the *Samgha*. Though he does not understand about the Three Gems, he immediately believes in them. Some men have such strong beliefs in their mind. They are not intellectuals, or wise men. Most of Buddhists have no knowledge of Buddha, no knowledge of his sermons, no knowledge of the ways of liberation, no knowledge of The Four Noble Truths, no knowledge of *Dhamma*, no knowledge of *Samghā*. But they pay respect to the Three Grms, offer flowers, candles and water to the Buddha, they go to pagoda and make pay obeisance to Buddha images. These are *Pasādasaddhā*. It is the lowest stage of *saddhā* in Buddhism.

The inner being of those who offer water, light, food, umbrellas, robe and flowers with veneration to the Three Gems will attain clearness, peace and tranquility. This shows that The Three Gems are believable. That is, said to be the true belief or *saddhā*.

### 5. The *Saddhā* and Buddhist Life

*Saddhā* is one of the greatest powers to overcome difficulties, troubles and suffering which man faces. Once, *Alavaka*, the god of ogres in the Buddhist literature asked the Buddha some questions: how to overcome the circle of rebirth and what the noblest character of human being are. The Buddha replied that it is *saddhā*.

*Saddhā* plays a vital role in *Theravāda Buddhist* life. The following explain why *saddhā* plays an indispensable role in *Theravāda Buddhism*.

1. *Saddhā* is one of the fourteen wholesome factors.
2. *Saddhā* is one of the attributes of a lay devotee in Buddhism. Without it he or she not is regarded as a good lay devotee.
3. *Saddhā* for a good Buddhist meditator is essential. It is also a basic need for all good aspirants.
4. *Saddhā* is one of the controlling factors of mind (*Indriyas*)

The word *indriyas* means the ruling or controlling of mind for the realization of Dhamma for the fruition of one's goal.

5. *Saddhā* is the Strength of *Dhamma* (*Bala*)

*Dhamma* strength or *bala* means great power which can destroy and eradicate the opposition. *Bala* is also like the commander or general. It serves as trust in the Buddha *Sāsana* for *Bhikkus* and lay folk.

### Conclusion

By studying the nature, the role and the utility of faith, *saddhā*, in *Theravāda* Buddhism, we can understand the essence and importance of it in our life.

In *Theravāda* Buddhism, the exact meaning and definition of *saddhā*, real *saddhā*, and unreal *saddhā*, the necessity of *saddhā*, the limitation of *saddhā* etc; are already described. Buddhist *saddhā*, is totally devoid of any doubtful thing, any emotion, any imaginary thing, any unclear factors, any ambiguity and any supernaturalism. So it is said to be an objective and realistic view. It is open to challenge to all practical tests.

According to the principle of necessity, water is required for human being, salt is necessary for delicious curry and faith, *saddhā*, also is needed to overcome the oppositions, to attain the benefits of mundane and super mundane and to develop mental purity. But the principle of necessity and sufficiency *saddhā* alone is not sufficient for the completion of life. Other factors are also required in association.

For the benefits of the present and the future existence, however, it is necessary to build strong and unshakable faith in the Three Gems, *Kamma* and mental power in man.

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ချမ်းမြေ့ဆရာတော် (၁၉၉၃) တက္ကသိုလ်ဓမ္မသဘင်၊ ရန်ကုန်မြို့၊ ချမ်းမြေ့ရိပ်သာကျောင်း။

ဆန်းလွင် (အရှင်အာဒိစ္စရံသီ) (၂၀၀၅) ဗုဒ္ဓဘာသာဝင်တွေ ယုံကြည်တာက၊ ရန်ကုန်မြို့၊ နန်းဒေဝီစာပေ။

ဉာဏိဿရ၊ အရှင် (၁၉၈၅) ဗုဒ္ဓဝါဒအခြေခံသဘော တရားများ၊စစ်ကိုင်း၊ သီတဂူ ဗုဒ္ဓ တက္ကသိုလ်။