

The Concept of *Sīla* in Myanmar *Theravāda* Buddhist Society

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Abstract

This paper is an attempt to prove why the right awareness and practicing "*Sīla*" Moral conduct) is important for Myanmar *Theravāda* Buddhist society. It can be tentatively said that if one comprehends the moral value of *Sīla* and complies with it, he or she may be good person. The descriptive method and evaluative method will be used to clarify the concept of *Sīla* and to make discussion about its important role in Myanmar *Theravāda* Buddhist society. As the contribution of this paper it will be expected to shed light on that *Sīla* is the most appropriate moral value for leading everyone to be morally or socially good person.

Key words : *sīla*, moral value, good person

Introduction

Morality is the essence of human beings as well as a norm that measures the level of a culture. Moralities are core values and standards of a culture. In Myanmar proverb there is a saying, "By scanning (looking into) the length of lotus stalk, one can discern the depth of the water." In this way, by examining the moral norms of a culture it can decide the level of a culture. If the moral values are low, it can be said that its culture will be low and if the standards of the moralities are high, the culture will be high. Therefore, the standard and status of a culture is nothing concerned with physical wealth but that of spiritual enrichment of the people. It may be said that the more higher the spiritual and moral level the higher its cultural standard is. In this respect, in Myanmar *Theravada* Buddhism, most Myanmar advocates the moral value than physical wealth and power.

In daily life, it is obvious that the words "ethical" and "moral" are used interchangeably in common sense. If there is no moral then there is no ethics. But, ethics and morality are not identical in their etymological roots as well as the emphatical points. Ethics comes from Greek word "*ethos*", meaning "character" and morality comes from the Latin word "*mores*" meaning "customs" or "manners". For that reason, moral lays down not only the rules and regulation of human conduct but also the ideal patterns of human character in its original meaning of the West. Ethics critically examines these moral rules, regulation, norms, ideals and patterns. Ethics studies the moral aspect of man. Literally, ethics is the study of the habitual conduct, character and customs of the human beings.¹

In the Buddhist literature, it can be seen that the Buddha did not spend His worthwhile life for preaching the metaphysical problems, but rather devoted his effort to promoting ethical standards in society. People in modern society pay little attention to moral values. But Buddhist ethics attempts to find the basic problems with a society. 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. Buddhist ethics mainly consists of the

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¹ K.N. Kar. (1961). *Ethics*. Rangoon : Sarpay Beikman. P.4.

threefold training as the three bases of meritorious action. The three bases are charity (*dāna*), morality (*sīla*) and meditation (*bhāvanā*). This paper will focus on sila (morality).

Meaning of Sila

The Pali word *sila* we have been translating as morality. *Sila* is formally defined as abstinence from unwholesome bodily and verbal action. But Buddha's teaching basically involve these three basic categories; "avoid evil, Do good deeds, and purify the mind." Among them, "to avoid evil", as a very first step, is directly associated with the practice of morality. There are many rules and regulations for society in Buddhist ethics.

Mind Leads All Actions

In every society, it is important to cultivate wholesomeness, not only in our actions and speech but in our thinking as well. Morality in Buddhism is not founded on any doubtful divine revelation, nor is it the imaginative invention of an exceptional mind, but a rational and practical code based on verifiable facts and individual experience. According to Buddhism, there are deeds which are ethically good and bad deeds which are neither good nor bad and deeds which lead to the cessation of all deeds. Good deeds are essential for one's emancipation, but when once the ultimate goal of the noble life is attained, one transcends both good and evil.

According to the Buddhist teaching, man is composed of body and mind. So, human body and mind are important equally, but most people give greater significance to physically than to mentality. Actually, material prosperity is mind-made; mind precedes all things. In the *Dhammapada*, the Buddha said,

"All mental phenomena have mind as their forerunner; they have mind as their chief; they are mind-made. If one speaks or acts with an evil mind and, *dukkha* follows him just as the wheel follows the hoof-print of the ox that draws the cart."²

Thus, a human being first need to nature the mind because whatever a person does whether good or bad arises from the mind's intention. In Myanmar philosophical thought, attribute of mind is sentient but it cannot be measured, weighted, cannot be photographed and has no color. Body has no sentient quality but it can be measured, weighted, has colors and can be photographed. Those two opposite natures synthesize in man. Though mind depends on body it leads all action such as mental, verbal or bodily actions. Mind precedes all man's deeds. Before he does something verbally or bodily, mind's initiation comes first. Before man speaks mental factor firstly appears what to speak and so also before man bodily does mental factor comes first what and how to do.

Mind is composed of consciousness which arises in the contact of man's organs such as eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body, mind and external materials such as sight, sound, smell, taste, touch and mental factors in mind. By the contact of eyes and sight consciousness of seeing appears that of ears and sounds the consciousness of hearing, that of nose and smells the consciousness of smelling, that of tongue and tastes the consciousness to taste, that of body and touches the consciousness of touch and that of mind and mental objects the consciousness of mind are emerged respectively.

Therefore, mind is the important factor because it is only the mind which motivates man to do good or bad deeds. Mind is composed of many aggregates such as feeling, perception, consciousness and other mental formations. In the mental formations, *Cetanā* is the most important one which co-ordinates the other mental factors. *Cetanā* like a commander-in-

² Narada Thera. (1972). *The Dhammapada*. Colombo : The Colombo Apotheries Co., Ltd. p.1.

chief plays predominant part in all actions of man. In Myanmar Culture, *Cetanā* is called *Kamma*.

The Law of *Kamma*

The fundamental principles of Buddhist ethics are described as action, morality, and wisdom. *Kamma* means action which can be considered good, bad, or neutral. According to Buddhist thought, if one behaves well, one will acquire good consequences; on the contrary, if one behaves badly one will incur bad consequences. Therefore *Kamma* is moral action and is responsible for ethics. There are three actions involved in the performance of man's social dealings. They are mental, verbal and physical actions. If a person's motive of his mind is good then good actions will follow and if his motive is evil then evil actions will follow. According to the Buddhism, man is born in this world because of his own craving attachment. No one creates him. There is no God who creates man. Man himself is creator of his life. Man is born according to the natural law of *Kamma*.

Kamma is a volitional action that is being has done as merit or demerit. When man is dead though man cannot bring his own wealth, materials and honors his actions accompany with him. If man had done good or evil deeds then powers of good or evil actions will create life that man should deserve. If man had done good deeds such as charities or donations then he may attain celestial abode and if man had done evil deeds such as killings, thefts, adultery etc, and then man will suffer evil abodes of hell or animal's life. What life one should obtain when he dies will be determined by his deeds of good or bad. Therefore, they are the result of our actions. Sometimes, if his evil deeds are very cruel and commit many times, then man has to suffer the results of bad deeds in this present life before he dies.

Myanmar Buddhists believe that every cause has its own effects over nature and the life of man. If a mango-seed is planted, mango-plant will grow and later there will be mango fruit. A mango seed cannot grow an apple tree. This is a law of causation.

The meaning of the Law of *Kamma* can be compared with an illustration of reflection of mirror. If a person look at the mirror in smile then the smiling face will appear in the mirror and if he looks at the mirror in angry face then angry image will reflect. It means that the actions whether mental, verbal, or bodily determine his life. Mind is very important and essential in life. Whatever man acts mind and its motive of good or bad *Cetanā* leads all actions. Thus, purification of mind is needed. In *The Dhammapada*, Verse No. 183, it states as follows;

"To refrain from all evil,
To do what is good.
To purify the mind"³

To purify the mind means to drive out the ill wills which exist in the mind. So long as mind is full of evil thoughts and evil actions will follow it. In order to avoid the evil actions everyone have to purify their mind. It is meant that the mind needs simple and clean without any evil stains. According to Buddhism, there are ten bad deeds or actions which refuse to go along with the purification of mind. They are,

1. Killing
2. Stealing

³ Ibid., p.6.

3. Sexual misconduct
4. Lying
5. Tale bearing
6. Harsh language
7. Frivolous talk
8. Covetousness
9. Ill-will
10. False views

Specifically, the bad deeds as the unwholesome which are to be avoided relate to the means of action, and these are of the body, speech mind. There are three unwholesome actions of the body, four of speech and three of mind that are to be avoided⁵. The above ten kinds of bad deeds are due to (1) *lobha*, or greed, (2) *dosa*, or hatred, (3) *moha*, or ignorance. They are the roots of evil deed.

The first root, *lobha* (greed) is desire for sensual pleasure, such as wealth, rank, etc. This greed is in all of us like a powerful thirst. Greed is like a thick fog that bans the seeing. Men, when blinded by desire are carried away by powerful current. They cannot realize what is good or bad, where they are going and they are jealousy and rivalry.

The second root, *dosa* (hatred) is anger or ill-will. It is tendency within men which tend to challenge others for the right what men desire. The tendency is to try and dominate other and men want others to obey them what they will.

The third misery is *moha*, (ignorance). Ignorance is the primary root of all evil. It is far more subtle than greed and hatred because by having it men cannot distinguish between right and wrong and men cannot see any good in any action. When a man is carried away by the current of ignorance he becomes brutal and any sense of a common humanity fades from his mind.

On the one hand, the good roots are, (1) Absence of greed (unselfishness), (2) Absence of hatred (love), and (3) Absence of ignorance (wisdom). There is a way and it can achieve them. No one will help it. Men must do themselves. In Buddhism, there is a well known teaching of Buddha for enhancing the moral or social improvement of every person as mentioned below.

"*Atta hi attano natho*, "self is one's refuge;

Oneself, indeed, is one's savior, for what other savior would there be? With oneself well controlled one obtains a savior difficult to find"⁵

One has to do himself and it will obtain certainly because these seeds of nobility lie latent in us. By cultivation they will grow. But they cannot grow until we make our hearts soft and warm with love so that they may grow to fulfillment. According to the Buddha, one must do it gradually ourselves. Just a mountaineering climber dose his work slowly and slowly one has desire to obtain be must do it gradually. The Buddha, in the *Mala Vagga*, 239, instructed the practitioners or devotees of *Theravada* Buddhism as follows;

"Purify Yourself Gradually-

⁴ Ledi Sayadaw. (2004). *The Manuals of Buddhism*. Yangon : Mother Ayeyarwaddy Publishing House. pp. 295-296.

⁵ Thera, Narada, (1972). *The Dhammapada*. Colombo : The Colombo Apotheries Co., Ltd. p.48.

By degree, little by little, from time to time, a wise person should remove his own impurities, as a smith removes (the dross) of silver."⁶

According to Buddhist view, the cultivation of unselfishness includes not only a feeling in the heart but also the performance of those outward actions by which that feeling is manifested. The unselfish man puts himself in the position of others and tries to identify himself with all. The best way to be happy, therefore, is to make other happy. In short, whatever deed men do, whatever word men utter and whatever thought men think, should be for the good, peace and happiness not only of themselves, but others. The result will be peace, happiness and friendship.

To promote the mind, a person must make the sublime seed, the seeds of loving-kindness, grow in men's heart. To love one another men should realize that everyone are all brothers. In the *Metta Sutta*, the Buddha has expounded the nature of love in Buddhism. "Just as a mother would protect her only child even at the risk of her own life, even so, let one cultivate a boundless heart towards all beings. Let his thoughts of boundless love pervade the whole world, above and across without any obstruction, without any hearted, without any enmity." If the enemies point out men's mistakes and weaknesses, men must be grateful to them. "By loving-kindness one can overcome anger. In the *Kodha Vagg*, 223, the Buddha said,

"Overcome anger by love

Conquer anger by love

Conquer evil by good.

Conquer the stingy by giving.

Conquer the liar by truth"⁷

Moha can be overcome by wisdom. Wisdom is the power of seeing things as they truly are and how to act rightly when the problems of life come before. The seeds of wisdom lie latent in men, and when men's heart are soft and warm with love they grow into their power.

The Eightfold Noble Path in Buddhist Society

In the Four Noble Truths, the Fourth Noble Truth is that of the way leading to the cessation of suffering, known as the Middle Way because it avoids two extremes. One extreme is the search for happiness through the pleasure of the senses, which is low, common, unprofitable and the way of the ordinary people. The other extreme is the search for happiness through self-mortification in different forms of asceticism, which is painful, unworthy and unprofitable. Having himself first tried these two extremes, and having found them to be useless, the Buddha discovered through personal experience the Middle Way or Path which gives vision and knowledge, which leads to calm, insight, enlightenment, *Nibbāna*. This Middle Path is generally referred to as the Eightfold Noble Path, because it is composed of eight elements namely,

1. Right view
2. Right thought
3. Right speech
4. Right action
5. Right livelihood
6. Right effort
7. Right mindfulness and
8. Right concentration⁸

⁶ Ibid., p.190.

⁷ Ibid.,

All eight elements of the path being with the word "right", which translates the Pali word *Samma*. These denote completion, togetherness and coherence and can also suggest the senses of "perfect" or "ideal". In Buddhist philosophy, the Eightfold Noble Path is often represented by means of the *dharmma* wheel (*dharmacakra*), which consists of eight spokes, represent the eight elements of the path.

The Eightfold Noble Path was rediscovered by Gautama Buddha during his quest for enlightenment. But the scriptures describe an ancient path which has been followed and practiced by all the previous Buddha. The Eightfold Noble Path is a practice said to lead its practitioner toward self-awakening and liberation. The path was taught by the Buddha to his disciples so that they could follow it. In the same way, the Buddha saw an ancient path, an ancient road, traveled by the Rightly Self-awakened Ones of former times. He followed that path and came to direct knowledge of the cessation of aging and death, direct knowledge of the path leading to the cessation of aging and death. With knowing that directly, He, the Buddha has revealed it to monks, nuns, male lay followers and female lay followers and other well beings. The Eightfold Noble Path has three aspects: morality (*sila*), meditation (*Samadhi*) and wisdom (*paññā*). Of these aspects the ones most important to human behavior are morality and wisdom. Buddhist ethical conduct aims at gaining a prosperous and harmonious life for both the individual and society.

As mentioned above, Right Understanding is explained as having the knowledge of the Four Noble Truths. In other words, it is the understanding of things as they really are. Right Understanding also means that one understands the nature of what wholesome *kamma* (merits) are and unwholesome *kamma* (demerits) and how they may be performed with the body, speech and mind. By understanding *kamma*, a person will learn to avoid evil and do good, thereby creating favorable outcomes in his life.

***Sīla* as one of the Aspects**

The word "*Sīla*" means keeping or preserving the good moralities. The habit of preserving the mind to be good is very important as well as essential for a culture. Men need to train their minds to be good in every moment. According to Ashin Thittila in his *Essential Themes of Buddhist Lectures*,

"When a man has stilled the raging torrents of greed, hatred and ignorance, he becomes conscientious, full of sympathy and he is anxious for the welfare of all living beings. Thus he abstains from stealing, and is upright and honest in all his dealings; he abstains from sexual misconduct and is pure, chaste; he abstains from tale-bearing. What he has heard in one place he does not repeat in another so as to cause dissension; he unites those who are divided and encourages those who are united. He abstains from harsh language, speaking such words as are gentle, soothing to the ear and which go to the heart. He abstains from vain talk, speaking what is useful at the right time and according to the facts. It is when his mind is pure and his heart is soft by being equipped with this morality and mental development that the sublime seed, wisdom, grows."⁹

Therefore it can be said that Buddhist ethics is concerned with the principles and practices that help one to act in good ways. One's actions can have either harmful or beneficial consequences for oneself and others. The core ethical code is known as the five precepts. These are not rules or commandments, but principles of training, which are undertaken freely and put into practice with intelligence and sensitivity. However, there are five precepts which are considered to be the basic moral rules and principles to society.

⁸ Walpola Rahula (1961). *What the Buddha Taught*. Bedford. The Gordon Limited. p. 32.

⁹ Ashin Thittila. (1992). *Essential Themes of Buddhist Lectures*. Yangon : Department of Religious Affairs, p-67.

The first precept is that 'Not killing or causing harm to other living being'. This is the fundamental ethical principle for Buddhism, and all the other precepts are elaborations of this. The precept implies acting non-violently wherever possible. The positive counterpart of this precept is loving kindness.

As a second precept, stealing is an obvious way in which one can harm others. One can also take advantage of people, exploit them or manipulate them, all these can be seen as ways of taking the not-given. The positive counterpart of this precept is generosity. One of the codes of a harmonious human society as taught by the Buddha is to refrain from stealing. In human society, one has to work to earn our living. With the money that one earns, one has to buy the necessities of life for one's sustenance. One treasures these necessities because he or she obtained them through their own sweat and labor. People can part with them, if the requirements were forcibly taken away from them through thieving or other means. Just as people do not like other to steal possessions, people should all adopt the precept to refrain from stealing under any circumstances.

The third precept has been interpreted in many ways over time, but essentially it means not causing harm to oneself or others in the area of sexual activity. The positive counterpart of this precept is contentment. From the past to the present day, many happy families have been broken up or disrupted due to man's inordinate sexual desires. One should control his passions and behave in a polite and ethical manner. Hence the Buddha enjoined all human beings to refrain from committing adultery. All of them expect their family ties to be respected; hence they should all uphold this particular precept.

In the fourth precept, speech is the crucial element in one's relations with others and yet language is a smooth medium, and they often deceive themselves or others without even realizing that this is what they are doing. Truthfulness, the positive counterpart of this precept, is therefore essential in an ethical life. One of the most difficult precepts to follow in this modern era is the precept to abstain from lying or telling falsehoods. For fear of punishment, a child would at once deny that he has committed a misdeed. In a court of law, a witness would be prepared to tell a deliberate lie in order to save a friend or a relative. However, lying is an intolerable deed, particularly if a person were to create deliberate lies in order to put someone in trouble. Another very distasteful act of lying is to slander by spreading unfounded lies in order to smear the good name of another person. The Buddha has enjoined us as good Buddhists to refrain from telling lies. Everyone should uphold the truth. Everyone should honor this precept and refrain from indulging in falsehoods.

The last precept is refraining from drink and drugs that obscure the mind. The positive counterpart of this precept is mindfulness, or awareness. Mindfulness is a fundamental quality to follow the Buddhist path, and experience shows that taking intoxicating drink or drugs tends to run directly counter to this. Therefore it can be seen that many Buddhists around the world recite the five precepts every day, and put them into practice in their lives.

In the five precepts and the Eightfold Noble Path the Buddha gave spiritual guidelines on how to conduct a decent way of life. But to these guidelines must be added the other important injunctions of the Buddha to do good, to radiate compassion and to practice loving kindness. This is most essential. The practice of radiating compassion and loving kindness is the very essence of the Buddhist teachings to a way of life that is morally good. It is a positive quality of the enlightened mind which promotes a healthy ethical attitude. By the practice of loving kindness, one becomes unable of indulging in killing, stealing, lying, slandering or using harsh and unseemly language.

Conclusion

As mentioned above, it is attempted to clarify the meaning and the important role of *Sila* in Myanmar *Theravada* Buddhist society. Accordingly, by means of literature survey and reconsideration the Buddha's teachings, it can be said that *Sila* is the foundation of Buddhist ethics and it is not only for religious practitioners but for every person whose those have the intention to upgrade their moral standards and social conducts. For the achievement of *Nibbāna*, the Eightfold Noble Path is the entire or complete way. Here, it can be categorized as the three fundamental elements such as *Sila*, *Samadhi* and *Pañña* and among these *Sila* plays a crucial role in daily life of ordinary people.

In the everyday lives of human beings, morality is very important as its crucial role in human relationship. Especially in Myanmar culture, more emphasize on morality than that of wealth, power and knowledge of wisdom. According to Buddhist literature, in the Eightfold Noble Path *Sila* is the training of one's body, actions and speech. *Samadhi* is the calming, the settling, of the mind's anxiety and confusion, making the mind peaceful and quiet. *Pañña* is the training in investigation, reflection, learning to incline the firm and calm mind toward the true nature of man's being, his own reality, and the reality of the world around men.

Although *Sila*, the training of the body and speech is considered the foundation for the training of the mind, it also requires the development of Wisdom. Everyone must come to understand the value of that training, the value of restraint and unfortunate consequences of neglecting such training. Wisdom is in fact what we might call the defining characteristic of the Buddha's Teaching in that whatever the sphere of activity and whatever the level of practice, wisdom is always considered to be that vital component that governing factor.

Whenever Wisdom is lacking, there is ignorance and in the darkness of ignorance its very easy for the various kinds of craving, pride and self-importance to overwhelm the mind. Meditation is usually considered, rather narrowly, to be the application of certain techniques to still or to investigate the mind, Thus, in the Eightfold Path as it has summarized, it is threefold training for body, speech and mind (*Sila*) is essential as well as the others, *Samadhi*, and *Panna* play important roles and they all are needed and to be harmony. Not only in religious affairs but also in their daily deeds by purifying their mind, their actions will give effective good results in social, economic, political and other affairs. As men are the ordinary persons there will be mental evil more or less.

Therefore, the observance of *Sila* or at least five precepts leads to harmony at several levels such as social, psychological, *kammic* and contemplative. As the social philosophy, the principles of *Sila* help to establish harmonious interpersonal relations, welding the mass of differently constituted members of society with their own private interests and goals into a cohesive social order in which conflict, if not utterly eliminate, is at least reduced.

To conclude, it can be said if one really understand the ethical value of *Sila* and complies with it, he can be full- grown and qualified person who is enable to lead his society. In this respect, this paper will contribute to shed light on that *Sila* is the most appropriate moral value for leading everyone to be morally or socially good person.

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