

## The Concept of Moral Responsibility in *Lokaniti*

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### Abstract

The aim of this paper is to show that moral responsibility is fundamental principle in daily life of Myanmar Society. The problem is that why moral responsibility can be fundamental principle in daily life of Myanmar Society. Man cannot live alone and he has to stay in the organization. So each person should be dutiful in his or her obligation. Those moral responsibilities are not so difficult. However, due to lack of mindfulness and lack of practice there may be some difficulties in social dealing. If those obligations are dutifully done, the whole society shall be peaceful and pleasant. The literature evidences from the treatise of *Lokaniti* are found to be capable of solving the above problem. This paper can fulfill to enhance morality and to sustain tradition of Myanmar culture.

**Key Words:** Ethics, moral responsibility, *Lokaniti*

### Introduction

The word philosophy comes from the two Greek words "*Philein*" and "*Sophia*". '*Philein*' means 'to love' and '*Sophia*' means 'wisdom'. Therefore philosophy means love of wisdom. The task of philosophy is to discuss or solve great problems of the universe. Philosophy tries to give us a comprehensive view of the universe. Philosophy has five main branches. They are metaphysics, epistemology, logic, ethics and aesthetics.

Ethics is one of the branches of philosophy. Ethics lays down the standard and criteria by which we can judge human's conducts. Some deeds are right, good and ought to be done and some deeds are wrong, bad and ought to be avoided. Ethics sometimes called moral philosophy which concerned with morally good or bad and morally right or wrong. Ethics also deals with the moral concepts such as, rightness, goodness, duty, responsibility, justice, virtue, and so on.

The aim of ethics is to guide the individual to become the perfect member of society. So, ethics plays an essential role in society. Man has to follow the moral responsibility for the benefit to human society. There are many duties to follow for people such as social duty, political duty, moral duty, etc. If man observes these duties for the benefit of human society, human society will develop. If not so, human society will be in ruins. Therefore moral responsibility is important for society.

Man finds out his own good things from society and man can learn his education from society. Without society, man cannot exist. Ethics deals with the conduct of individuals and society deals with the conduct of the community. Although ethics and society are different, they are related to each other.

Man is social animals. He cannot stay alone. He has to stay in the organization. So, man faced the basic needs such as food, clothing and shelter to be alive. While solving those problems, they have to associate with one another. At that time, social

problems are brought to them. To solve the conflicts, therefore, man should obey social disciplines and duty or responsibility.

Just as the linchpin is fitted to prevent the wheel from going off its axle, the moral responsibility are prescribed to keep the people within the ethical rules of conduct.

The moral responsibility must be observed in social relationships in the human society. Although these duties are not hard to observe, there can be many difficulties in complying with these bounden duties in conducting the social relations through negligence and lack of practice. By adhering to these social responsibilities, there can be a happy, peaceful and harmonious human society.

According to Myanmar tradition, if one person stands in association with another, both of them have mutual moral responsibilities. There is nobody who is free from social responsibility. It is learnt that, apart from ordinary laymen, even the ascetic monk who seeks solitude has moral responsibility. Moral responsibilities are respectively specified for relevant ones.

Myanmar society is the one that highlights religious and traditional culture. It is calm, peaceful and simple living society. Myanmar moral principle is composed of love of truth, resistance to injustice, mutual forbearance and sympathy. Moreover Myanmar nationals are, since their childhood, brought up closely to the teachings of Lord Buddha and *Lokaniti*.

### A Study of Moral Responsibility in *Lokaniti*

It is said that different cultures have different moral rules or codes. The moral standards are relative to some society. So, we can say that there is no objective truth in social ethics.

Myanmar has its own history, culture, language, religion and morality. Myanmar culture includes customs and traditions, religion and religious

practices, language and literature, art and artistic activities, religious and social festivals and social norms.

Myanmar literature is one of the components of Myanmar culture. Myanmar literature consists of various *suttas*, *niti*, maxims, saying or proverb and so on. Of many kinds of Myanmar literature, *lokaniti* plays an essential role in Myanmar culture.

In Myanmar, there are many kinds of literature concerning moral responsibility such as *Mingala Sutta*, *Dhammapada*, and *Lokaniti* and so on. Among them, moral responsibility is described in the *Lokaniti*.

*Caturangabala*, a minister of *Pinya Era*, had compiled in *pāli*, the treatise *Lokaniti* on the basis of so many abstracts from other treatises including the teachings of Lord Buddha.

In *Inwa* Period, the Venerable Sayadaw U Buddh (a) U Pote" translated the treatise into Myanmar prose. Under the reign of King Thibaw, U Shin Galay versified *Lokaniti* into Myanmar *Pyo*. In the period after the exile of King Thibaw, James Grace, the scholar in *Pāli* of Yangon College translated into English.

*Lokaniti* is the treatise that makes people prudent and moral and polite in manner, speech, and mind. The treatise *Lokaniti* was highlighted in education in ancient time, and accordingly the maxims and ideas of *Lokaniti* infiltrates into Myanmar society.

*Lokaniti* is a treatise that is guidance to development of social dealing, social character, and social life. In addition, *Lokaniti* teaches that every person has moral responsibility for anyone or for the whole society. So, *Lokaniti* may be known as the treatise of the guide to a good life.

*Lokaniti* is presented in seven chapters, viz, (1) on the wise (2) on the good man (3) on the foolish man (4) on the friend (5) on women (6) on the King or ruler and (7) on miscellaneous matters.

On discussing about the wise man, *Lokaniti* points out the importance of wisdom or knowledge by asserting that the world in which we live is governed by wisdom or knowledge.

Wisdom or knowledge can create and acquire everything, worldly prosperity, and peace of life. Moreover, the composer asserted that *Lokaniti* could be taken into consideration even for the *Samsara* (i. e., endless round of births and rebirths):

How can there be proficiency for one who is indolent, wealth for one without proficiency, friendship for one without wealth, happiness for the friendless merit for the unhappy, and Nibban for the unmeritorious person? (James Gray (1886))

Knowledge can create everything and finally knowledge can provide freedom from *samsara*.

And *Lokaniti* gives guidelines for learning knowledge, one should not despise any knowledge of arts and sciences however little or small; it is when property acquired such knowledge, it may provide means of livelihood. For this reason people had been

earning their living, by generations, in making handicrafts.

Besides, *Lokaniti* suggests as follows, One who, in the first place, has not acquired knowledge, in the second, has not obtained wealth, and, thirdly, has not acquired the Law –what will he do in the fourth place? (James Gray (1886))

A man should learn knowledge since his first age of the life.

*Lokaniti* suggests that parents should allow their children to learn knowledge since their childhood. Myanmar human society holds a concept that if the parents fail to allow their children learn knowledge; the children are deemed to be enemy to their parents. Furthermore *Lokaniti* says, as follows:-

A potter does not strike a pot to break it, but to fashion it: a teacher beats his pupils to increase their knowledge, not to throw them into the states of suffering. (James Gray (1886))

The teachers should give lessons by striking to increase their learning and knowledge.

Since in the time of ancient Myanmar Kings there had been the precedents of princes who were taught lessons by being struck. Being taught in such a way, the noble and righteous kings appeared.

In discussing on the good man or virtuous man, *Lokaniti* compiler says, as follows;

Should the sun rise in the west and Meru, king of mountains, bend—should the fire of hell grow cold and the lily grow on the mountain-top, yet unchangeable will be a good man's words. (James Gray (1886))

Although there may be freak of nature, the truth and righteousness of a good man never deviate.

Although the discussion refers to the good man, it is presented in comparison with the foolish man. On the basis of the teachings of the sages, it can be learnt that one should associate with the good man and there shall never be any loss or injury from such an association.

Associate with the good, form companionship with the righteous: it is good, not bad, knowing the goodly ways of righteous men. (James Gray (1886))

Knowingly that one is a foolish man; we should not associate with such person only because of greed or craving. We should give up associating with such a foolish man that may increase evil. *Lokaniti* says, as follows;

Spurn companionship with the wicked, cultivate the society of the virtuous; night and day do what is good; remember always the impermanence of worldly things. (James Gray (1886))

The law of impermanence is capable of keeping greed.

In spite of poverty, the son of noble birth who cherishes his family honor shall never commit any evil.

The children usually used to model after the manners of their parents. The children used to copy and practice the mother's speech and manner as well as the father's aggressive manners. The sages therefore remark that the parents are initial teachers of their children. *Lokaniti* compiler referred as follows:

Bad is the speech of one who has a vile mother, bad the conduct of one who has a vile father; but he who has a father and mother both vile, his speech as well as his conduct is bad. (James Gray (1886))

It is suggested that if both parents are devoid of good character, the children are liable to possess rough speech and rough character.

The children brought about by good parents are known as the children of good parents.

Good is the speech of an excellent mother, good is the conduct of one who has an excellent father, but he who has a mother and father both excellent, his speech as well as his conduct is good. (James Gray (1886))

It is suggested that if both parents have good character, the children are liable to possess gentle speech and gentle character.

The foolish man means the one who is under pretence of a good man. In addition, he is the foolish person who does not realize his major fault, but notice the other's minor fault. *Lokaniti* expresses how to organize the others for pacification.

One should win over an avaricious person by money, one presumptuous by a salutation, an ignorant man by giving him way, and a wise one by speaking the truth. (James Gray (1886))

A greedy person can be overcome by taking money; a presumptuous person can be won by a salutation, a foolish man by giving him way and a wise person by telling the truth.

In the Chapter regarding the friend, *Lokaniti* expresses that there are a variety of friends. A human society naturally consists of both bad men and good men.

Though he is a stranger, he may be regarded as friend if he brings about the well-being of a relevant person. Though he is a relative, he may be regarded as a stranger if he does not bring about well-being of the relevant person. *Lokaniti*, in such a way, teaches how to select who is the true friend and who is the fake friend.

There is an old Myanmar saying "An upright man may be short tempered while crooked man may be sweet in manner ". It means that a straight forward man used to say clearly to the point without any qualification but on the other hand one who is sweet in speech may usually be dishonorable in mind.

Although people can keep away from dangerous poison, they may be trapped by honey mixed with poison. *Lokaniti* suggests that one should separate false friend from true friend in the light of wisdom.

A man who injures another's virtue in his absence, who speaks lovingly in his presence, one would consider such friendship like honey in a pot of poison. (James Gray (1886))

If one loses wealth, the friends, husband or wife, the brothers, and the sisters usually tend to leave the lost one. Those friends, husband or wife and brother or sister tend to approach one only if he possesses wealth. Wealth, therefore, is in this life, the truest friend. *Lokaniti* says like this

In poverty a friend forsakes you; son, and wife, and brothers too forsake you; being rich, they cling to you: wealth in this world is a great friend. (James Gray (1886))

*Lokaniti* expresses that the only person possessing the above aspects can be regarded as true friend.

The friends who stand by you in severe ailment, in time of scarcity, or in misfortune, when captured by an enemy, at a king's door, or in the charnel-house, they indeed are good friends. (James Gray (1886))

It means that a good friend defends his partnership who suffers sickness, in time of poverty, scarcity or in misfortune when captured by an enemy, at a king's door.

The chapter on women written as Myanmar society shall be incomplete if it is devoid of women.

The role of women is usually on parity of esteem with men. This chapter, also, is divided in two as good women and bad women.

The wealth of women is physical beauty and gentleness. Beside those aspects, the comeliness to the husband with respect to mentioning the bad women, *Lokaniti* says that women are quarrelsome, argumentative, aggressively insinuating, habitual to speak ill of other sight of, fond of delicious comestibles, eating the meal before the husband, and fond of often visiting the houses.

*Lokaniti* suggests that one should disown such a bad housewife even though she has given birth to hundred children.

A woman of contentious disposition or one using depreciatory language; one who, seeing a thing, has a desire to have it, who cooks and eats often, who eats before her husband, who lives in another's house—such a woman, even if she have a hundred sons, is shunned by men. (James Gray (1886))

*Lokaniti* also composes about good and noble women like this.

A youthful woman, who is blonde, has deer-like eyes and slender parts, fine

hair and even teeth, and is well-conducted—she, though she be in a wicked family, is sure to be taken to wife. (James Gray (1886))

*Lokaniti* suggests that one should marry such a youthful girl who possesses the above qualities even though she was born in a wicked family.

Also in the Chapter on the King it is expressed that six cardinal attributes of the chief are important and fundamental.

Patience, vigilance, and industry, liberality, compassion, and hope—these are the qualities of a leader; these qualities that should be wished for by the righteous. (James Gray (1886))

*Lokaniti* composer says that the above six cardinal attributes which leaders have to practice in relation to their person who serves under someone in office; underling; subordinate.

Precepts of the king are laid down by nobody. The noble and righteous kings with goodwill themselves lay down the precepts.

One replete with excellence like the Omniscient One does not appear to advantage without a patron: a gem, though priceless, looks well being set in gold. (James Gray (1886))

The above matter is that even Lord Buddha could not get prominent if devoid of the royal support. Even the great technicians shall not be able to contribute to public well-being with their technology or craft if devoid of kings or ruler's support.

In the chapter On the King, *Lokaniti* compiler draws the conclusion that reliance of race and religion, education, food, clothing and shelter, and social states lie in the king or ruler.

In "the Miscellaneous Chapter", some matters to be taken into consideration are expressed as follows.

How can there be piety in a priest who associates with a woman, compassion in a flesh-eater, truth in a drunkard, shame in one greatly covetous, proficiency in one who is slothful, and wealth in one with a bad temper? (James Gray (1886))

It means that a monk who associates with woman cannot have moral principles, one who kills animals to eat their flesh cannot be compassionate, a drunkard cannot speak the truth, a greedy man cannot be shameful, a slothful person cannot be proficient and a bad tempered person cannot be wealthy.

In addition, the matters liable to ruin of wealth and prosperity are also expressed.

A drunkard, and one who goes about at unseasonable moments; one who frequents a public assembly (for amusement); a gambler; one having wicked companions, and one who is an idler—these are persons who bring about the destruction of their own welfare. (James Gray (1886))

It is expressed that one who lives and acts in the above way shall not prosper, and prosperity already

gained may be ruined. One who can keep away from that manner shall escape ruin.

In addition *Lokaniti* suggests to know "avoid and observe" in this life. Frivolous ones are to be shunned and the most serious ones are to be approached. *Lokaniti* suggests in such a way.

Cotton in this world is light; lighter is one of a fickle disposition; lighter still one who does not suffer the reprimand of his elders; still more light he who is negligent of the teachings of Buddha.

A stone umbrella is weighty; weightier is the utterance of the gods; the chiding of elders is weightier still, and still more weighty are the words of Buddha. (James Gray (1886))

It means that a person who is negligent of the teachings of Buddha is lighter than cotton and a person who is accomplished of the teachings of Buddha is weightier than a stone.

## Conclusion

Myanmar people have their own national culture and tradition, standing on their own social system and social relations.

Myanmar society has been civilized for ages. Since the beginning of the emergence of Myanmar society, there arise concomitances, viz, social disciplines for society, moral responsibility for society, precepts to be observed and precepts to be avoided.

Learners at school are taught mutual moral duties in social dealing by teachers; non-learners are taught by parents, siblings and elders at home and taught by venerable monks.

The good moral action or virtuous conduct can be found in *Lokaniti*. *Lokaniti* teaches that every person has moral responsibilities for the good society.

The treatise *Lokaniti* has greatly influenced on Myanmar society. Although the youths of the present day have not seen and learnt *Lokaniti*, they are not distant to *Lokaniti*. This reason is that learned persons of old age who have learnt *Lokaniti* compose *Lokaniti* in various forms of literature and those learned old men hand it down to generations. *Lokaniti* therefore is still in use in harmony with Myanmar society.

Since in the education system of ancient Myanmar time, *Lokaniti* was taught as a "standard or criteria" for the sake of ethics, for becoming respectable gentlemen, and for becoming good administrators.

*Lokaniti* presents ways for various purposes in studies of economy, politics, social relation, diplomatic relation, administration, etc.

*Lokaniti* is also the treatise of the guide to social life. *Lokaniti* is the treatise that makes people prudent, moral and polite in manner, speech and mind. As the treatise *Lokaniti* is a text of practical application in this worldly life, it gives the guidance for "avoid or observe" and it should be studied and exercised.

Only if those principles are studied, then shall one be in harmony with social life. If all persons observe their respective moral rules, the human society will be peaceful and pleasant. If not so, human society will be unstable and chaotic due to spoilt social relation. So, moral responsibility is the fundamental principle on Myanmar *Theravada* Buddhist Society. *Lokaniti* therefore is moral responsibility for mankind to be observed. So *Lokaniti* is fundamental principle of Myanmar Society.

### Acknowledgements

I would be grateful to Dr. Ba Han, Rector, and Dr. Tin Tun Aung, Pro-rector, Meiktila University, for their encouragement. I also express my sincere thanks to Dr. Kyawt Kyawt Khaing, Professor and Head, and Dr. Phyu Phyu Shein, Professor, Department of Philosophy, Meiktila University, for their valuable suggestions and advising ideas in this work.

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