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Abstract

The word 'proverb' is derived from the Latin word 'proverbium', which means a brief popular saying. A proverb expresses a truth based on common sense or the practical experience of mankind. Every society has its own proverbs that can display thoughts of its people. Myanmar proverbs through the Ages have exhibited the Myanmar way of thinking and Myanmar way of living that identifies the national characteristics of the Myanmar people. This paper tries to reveal one of the basic principles of the Myanmar way of thinking reflected in Myanmar proverbs.

Key words: Myanmar way of thinking, a basic principle of the Myanmar way of thinking

Introduction: What Proverb Is

The word 'Proverb' is derived from the Latin word '*proverbium*': '*pro*' means forth and '*verbium*' means word. A proverb is called a brief popular saying. Some define proverb as 'a short wise saying'. A saying becomes a proverb when it is taken up and assimilated by the common people. Flourishing proverbs have their own significant characters. The characters of proverbs are as follows.

- (1) A proverb is short and to the point.
- (2) It is packed full of meaning.
- (3) It is neat and concise in form.
- (4) It has gained quick and lasting entry into the public mind.

These characters make proverbs memorable. A proverb expresses a truth based on common sense or the practical experience of mankind. Proverbs have given us a graphic picture of the development and progress of human life and thought. The function of a proverb is to provide the general advice about how to act and live in daily life. Moreover, they are employed for many other purposes as follows:

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- (1) to convey practical knowledge
- (2) to enhance the way of life of people
- (3) to demonstrate universal truths

The study of proverbs is called paremiology and can be dated back as far as Aristotle. The foremost proverb scholar Wolfgang Mieder defines the term proverb as follows.

'A proverb is a short, generally known sentence of the folk which contains wisdom, truth, morals, and traditional views in a metaphorical, fixed and memorizable form and which is handed down from generation to generation.'¹

Many proverbs have their origins in oral traditions but some have their origin in literature. The synonyms of proverbs are 'adage', 'saw' and 'byword'. Proverbs reflect the cultural values including the way of thinking, and the physical environment from which they arise. For instance, island cultures have proverbs about sea, and highland cultures have proverbs about mountains.

The Way of Thinking

The phrase 'ways of thinking' refers to any individual's thinking in which the characteristic features of the thinking habits of the culture to which he belongs are revealed.² The ways of thinking of a society are conditioned by its cultural habits and attitudes.

Generally speaking, all members of a society may think in the same way about certain shared experiences, although the individuals may think in slightly different ways. This paper will point out a general tendency of the thinking of Myanmar people.

The Importance of Proverbs in Ways of Thinking

In studying the ways of thinking of a people, we have to find the clues in their language. We can say that when a special language system comes into being, the special identity of the people who use that language has come into being. The existence of a common language serves as a criterion for the

¹ Mieder, Wolfgang (1993), *Proverbs Are Never Out of Season*, p- 24

² Nakamura, Hajime (1964), *Ways of Thinking of Eastern Peoples*, p- 5

identification of a people. Since the proverbs are part of language, it can reveal the way they generally think - we come to know their perceptions and attitudes. Therefore by studying Myanmar proverbs through the ages, we can understand the Myanmar way of thinking.

Myanmar Proverbs

The sources of Myanmar proverbs are traditional legends, myths, folklore, historical accounts and Buddhist literature such as the Buddha Birth Stories (*jatakas*) and *Dhammapada*. In fact, it can be said that there are two sources of Myanmar proverbs: one is Buddhist tradition and the other is the Myanmar way of life.

Myanmar proverbs are categorized into two kinds, namely, *zagabone* (စကားပုံ) and *hsoyoe* (ဆိုရိုး). *Zagabone* means 'word picture or story'. It covers sayings which carry a message of the Myanmar people couched in some form of metaphorical expression. *Hsoyoe* means 'adage' whose import can be deduced from their literal content.¹

Like other world's proverbs, some Myanmar proverbs are traceable to their origins but some are untraceable. Some are derived from the passages of Myanmar literature and some are formed into proverbs from excerpts of the *Pitaka* texts. According to Myanmar scholars, there may be three common qualities of Myanmar proverbs. They are as follows:

1. Changing the wider meaning into a brief account
2. To be instilled with essence
3. Vibrancy

Most Myanmar proverbs reflect the Myanmar way of living as well as the Myanmar way of thinking. A study of Myanmar proverbs will show that there are certain significant ideas and concepts that characterize Myanmar thought.

¹ Lu Zoe(San Lwin), (1996), Myanmar Proverbs, p-i

The Significant Characteristics of Myanmar Proverbs from the Standpoint of Philosophical Thought

In this paper, I would like to present five ideas or concepts characteristics of Myanmar proverbs. They are as follows:

1. The Idea of Harmony
2. The Idea of Moderation
3. The Idea of Unity in Contradiction
4. The Idea of Change (*yoniso manasikāra* ယောနိသော မနသီကာရ)
5. The Rejection of Extreme and Dogmatic Views

The Idea of Harmony

In Myanmar proverbs, it can be found the idea of Harmony of social relationship. The word 'Harmony' as a philosophical concept is used by the great philosophers of the East and the West. In the Korean Buddhist philosophy, it is believed that there is a harmony between the *Sutra* and Meditation. In the Greek philosophy, Plato believed that the universe was constructed and arranged based on harmonic principles.¹ So it can be said that the concept of harmony is used in religion and cosmology.

In Myanmar way of thinking, it can be found that the idea of Harmony plays a significant role in social relationship and in moral conducts. Myanmar people usually live together in harmony with nature as well as social environment. There are many Myanmar proverbs that express the idea of Harmony and some are as follows.

1. အများအကျိုးဆောင် ကိုယ့်အကျိုးဆောင် Doing good for the many brings benefit to oneself as well.
2. ကိုယ့်လက်သွားမှ သူ့လက်လာသည် Only if one extends his arms (alms), will others do the same.
3. ကြီးသူကိုရိုသေ ရွယ်တူကိုလေးစား ငယ်သူကိုသနား Be courteous towards elders, respect one's peers and treat the younger ones with kindness.

¹ Horowitz, Maryanne Cline(Ed.)(2005), New Dictionary of the History of Ideas, Vol.3, p-961

4. နည်းအမျှ များအဝ Share alike when it is scarce, and eat to your heart's content in abundant times.
5. ပျားလည်းစွဲသာ ရှဉ့်လည်းလျှောက်သာ A branch on which bees can swarm and squirrels scamper.
6. တောကြောင့်ကျားလုံ ကျားကြောင့်တောလုံ The forest is a refuge for the tiger and the tiger in return protects the forest.
7. ကိုင်းကျွန်းမှို ကျွန်းကိုင်းမှို Reeds depend on alluvial land and it on reeds.
8. ကျီးကိုဘုတ်ရိုသေ ဘုတ်ကိုကျီးရိုသေ The crow pays deference to the crow-pheasant and the crow-pheasant also pays deference to the crow.
9. တောအကျိုး ယုန်သိ၊ ယုန်အကျိုး တောသိ The rabbit knows the advantage of the existence of the jungle; the jungle knows the advantage of the rabbit that inhabits it.
10. ညီညာမှ ပြည်သာမည် If there is unity then the country will prosper.

The Idea of Moderation

It advocates avoidance of extremes. Myanmar people accept that it is best to follow the middle way that avoids extremes. Myanmar proverbs that advocate the idea of moderation are as follows:

1. တန်ဆေး လွန်ဘေး Healthful when taken in moderation, harmful when taken in excess.
2. မလျော့မတင်း စောင်းကြိုးညှင်း Tune the harp strings neither too taut nor too slack.
3. တင်းလွန်းလျှင်ပြတ် လျော့လွန်းလျှင်ပတ် If the string is too tightly tied, it will break off; if the string is too loosely tied, it will wrinkle.
4. လျော့လျှင်မိစ္ဆာ သာလျှင် ဒိဋ္ဌိ If one has less intellect, he may be atheistic. If one has greater intellect, he may become a skeptic.
5. ဝန်နှင့်အား မြားနှင့်လေး Adjust the burden to capability just as you match the arrow to the bow.
6. သေးလွန်းလျှင် မလှ၊ ရွေးလွန်းလျှင် မရ That which is too small is ugly; if one is too choosy then what is needed will not be obtained.

7. မောက်လွန်းသည့်ဆန် ဖိတ်သည် Overfilled rice may tend to spill.
8. သဒ္ဓါလွန် တဏှာကျံ Too much kindness turns into an attachment.
9. ကြက်ချည်သောကြိုးနှင့် ဆင်ကိုချည်ကပြတ်၏။ ဆင်ချည်သောကြိုးနှင့် ကြက်ကို ချည်ကလွတ်၏။ If the elephant's foot is tied with a tiny cord used for cocks, it will be abraded; if the cock's foot is tied with a massive rope used for elephants, it slip off.
10. ကရုဏာလွန်သော် ဒေါသ An excessive passion turns into a rage.

The Idea of Unity in Contradictions

It means seeking unity among opposite factors inherent in a situation. Many proverbs appear to contradict each other. Here, I would like to present pairs of contradiction which in different situations both may be sound and useful. Concerning the belief in fate, some proverbs show a reliance on fate and others do not.

1. ကံသာအမိ ကံသာအဖ Fate is the mother; fate is the father.
2. ကံချွန် လူမွန် Fate enhances; life brightens.
3. ကံမရှိ ဉာဏ်ရှိတိုင်းမွဲ Lack of past merit consigns a person to a life of poverty, however resourceful he may be.
4. ကံကောင်းသည့်ကျား သွားရင်းသမင်တွေ့ The lucky tiger runs smack into a deer while going about his own way.

The above proverbs imply that fate predominates in all activities. But there are other proverbs with views contrary to the above, such as:

1. ကံယုံ၍ ဆူးပုံမနင်းရာ Don't tread on a pile of thorns just because you think you are in luck.
2. ကျားရဲရာ ကြမ္မာမယိုးသာ Fate is not to be blamed where there is a rampant tiger.
3. ကံယုံသည့်ငါး ဝိုက်ကြားမှာသေ The fish, which relies on fate, dies in the net.

These proverbs say that fate alone is not sufficient in all activities. In Theravada Buddhism, the Law of *Kamma* states that every action produces an effect, which becomes a cause in relation to another effect that comes afterwards. *Kamma* means all kinds of intentional actions whether mental, verbal or physical. Some interpret the Law of *Kamma* as a form of fatalism where fate determines all actions of the individuals. Hence there appear these contradictory proverbs. But there are some other proverbs that take into account all factors such as fate as well as self-reliance. For example, ‘လုံ့လလည်းတူ မိုးလည်းကူ နွားချေးလည်းချ ကံလည်းမ’ Diligence, timely rains, fertilizing the soil, and good *kamma* are successful factors in agricultural life. It means that *Kamma*, knowledge and diligence are triple factors which are necessary for success in human life.

Other contradictory pairs are ‘သေချင်တဲ့ကျား တောပြောင်း A tiger which moves on to another jungle is courting death.’ and ‘တစ်ရွာမပြောင်း သူကောင်းမဖြစ် A person does not achieve noble status without leaving his own village.’ ; ‘အလျင်လာ အသာရ The prior arrival is better.’ and ‘အကြံတူ နောက်လူသာစမြဲ If their intention is the same, a latter-day man is better than the former.’ In these pairs, each may be sound in different situations. So Myanmar people are flexible in their way of thinking and maintain that one has to adapt and change relative to time, space and conditions. This has therefore led to a rejection of extremes in the Myanmar way of thinking.

The Idea of Change (*yoniso manasikāra* ယောနိသော မနသိကာရ)

When Myanmar people face difficulties in daily life, they nurture and try to adopt the attitude of ယောနိသော မနသိကာရ *yoniso manasikāra* or focusing thorough attention on accepting this world as changing. The idea of change can be found in many Myanmar proverbs. If one realizes that nothing is permanent then one can develop stability of thought. Some of these proverbs are:

1. မှန်ကင်းတလှည့် ထင်းတလှည့် A gilded pinnacle once, now relegated to the wood-pile.
2. ဗုံလုံတလှည့် ငါးပျံတလှည့် The bonlon fruit and the mudskipper are on top of each other by turn.

3. ရေစီးတခါ ရေသာတလှည့် Strain against the current sometimes and be under easy sail in calm waters at times.
4. သစ်ငုတ်မြင့်တုံ မြက်မြင့်တုံ The tree-stump and the grass come into prominence in turn.
5. ယုန်ကျူးချည် ခွေးကျူးချည် Sometime the rabbit passes and sometime the dog does.
6. ဆင်းရဲတခါ ချမ်းသာတလှည့် Misery alternates with well-being.
7. အတက်ရှိမှ အဆင်းရှိ Only if there is ascent there may be descent.
8. အသွားရှိမှ အလာရှိ Where there is a visit there is a return visit.

The Rejection of Extreme and Dogmatic Views

It means rejecting any point of view put forth as being authoritative without adequate grounds. This viewpoint can be found in many proverbs of Don'ts. They are as follows:

1. လှေနံ ခါးထစ် To dent the side of a drifting boat in order to mark the side where an object drops.
2. ကျား ကျား မီးယပ် May a patient be a male, anyway the illness is due to menstrual cause.
3. ငါ့မြင်းငါ့စိုင်း စစ်ကိုင်းရောက်ရောက် One allows his own horse to gallop even though it may reach Sagaing town.
4. ငါ့လှေငါ့ထိုး ပဲခူးရောက်ရောက် Even though the boat may at Bago town the rower carries on.
5. အမေမှာသည့်ဆန်တစ်ခွဲ သုံးစိတ်နှင့်မလဲ The half basket of rice that mother has asked for, shall not be bartered with a three quarter basket of the same rice.
6. မုံပေးသည့်ဘုန်းကြီး စာတတ် A monk who distributes cakes is the most learned.
7. ပျော့လျှင်ဖယောင်း မာလျှင်သံချောင်း A person is as soft as a bee-wax or as hard as a steel rod.
8. ရိုးလွန်းလျှင် အ If one is too simple he will appear to be stupid.

9. ကျီစားသန် ရန်ဖြစ် A strong teasing may lead to a quarrel.
10. ကြမ်းပိုးကို လိပ်ဖြစ်အောင်ပြောသည် A crook can turn a bed-bug into a tortoise.

A study of Myanmar proverbs shows the Myanmar Middle Way in Myanmar way of thinking. Here, I would like to present what Myanmar way of thinking is, and clarify the essence of Myanmar Middle Way.

In Myanmar, Buddhist culture is the main foundation of Myanmar culture because most Myanmar people are Theravada Buddhists. Theravada Buddhism arrived in Myanmar in the Pyu Era (1st century AD). As a clue to principles of Myanmar way of thinking it is important to study how they modified Buddhism. The Myanmar way of thinking has been greatly influenced by Buddhist philosophy. Belief in the Law of *Kamma* and the practice of the Middle Way are derived from Buddhism, which form the basic principles of Myanmar way of thinking. So Myanmar has its own way of thinking different from the Western way of thinking. Moreover, Myanmar way of thinking has its own specific characteristics which distinguish it from other Eastern ways of thinking.

In dealing with the Myanmar way of thinking, I can only point out a general tendency of the thinking of the people concerned. By 'Myanmar way of thinking' I do not mean the way of thinking of each and every individual but only the way of thinking of the majority of the people in Myanmar society. In Myanmar, it can be said that the Myanmar way of thinking is human-centered as illustrated by Myanmar proverbs and literature through the Ages. However, Myanmar way of thinking is different from that of India or that of China on some fundamental points. Although Myanmar received Buddhism from India, it cannot be said that Myanmar people have exactly the same views as the Indian people. The Myanmar way of thinking differs from Indian way of thinking because Myanmar people are creative and they have assimilated and adapted external influences to suit their nature and their environment. As a case in point it is evident that though they have adopted Buddhism that originated in India, the ways they practice and follow the Buddha's teachings and admonitions are purely Myanmar. Myanmar thought can also be said to be a synthesis of the fundamental principles of Buddhism such as the Law of *Kamma* and the *Mijjimapatipadā* with the innate way of thinking of the Myanmar people. For example, basically the Myanmar character and personality value freedom of choice and self-reliance. So the Law of *Kamma* which also focuses on self-reliance found fertile soil in the Myanmar people. The Buddha's teaching therefore enhanced and

systematized the native character of Myanmar thought. It can also be said that the Myanmar value knowledge and historical evidence says that the literacy rate of ancient Myanmar was high especially among males. So Buddhism which maintains that ignorance is the source of evil nourished and nurtured the basic Myanmar love of wisdom and knowledge.

Since the Bagan Period, Theravada Buddhism has spread and flourished in Myanmar. Although this school of Buddhism came from India via Sri Lanka to Myanmar, Myanmar people have assimilated and adopted it to suit their national character and it has become an important element of their culture. In his article '**Myanmar and Theravada**', Dr. Thein Zan (Nanda Thein Zan), Retired Professor/ Head of Philosophy Department, University of Yangon, writes,

"The focus of Myanmar way of thinking, unlike that of the West, is on man. It considers the nature of life and the world he lives in as well as of the universe as a whole only in relation to man."¹

"Though both the Myanmar and the Indians are interested in the study of man, their objectives are different. The ultimate objective of life for Indians is to be Brahman but the ultimate objective of life for Myanmar is to understand *Anatta Dhamma* and thereby to realize *Nibbana*."²

So the Myanmar way of thinking is different from Indian way and it has its specific characteristics.

Here, a question may arise concerning the distinction between the Myanmar way of thinking and ways of thinking of other Theravada Buddhist countries. The countries that accepted Theravada Buddhism do not have the same ways of thinking because of their different socio-cultural and historical backgrounds. There is a unity in the Theravada Buddhist foundation but they have differences in their ways of thinking according to their own socio-cultural, historical and geographical backgrounds. This makes one Theravada country different from other Theravada countries in their ways of thinking.

I would now like to clarify what I mean by the Myanmar Middle Way. The Myanmar Middle Way is derived from the Middle Way

¹ Nanda Thein Zan. (1983, Nov.) Myanmar and Theravada, Nyan Lin Dhamma sarpadethar, p-96

² Ibid., p-90

(*Mijjhimapatipadā*) of Buddhism. In Buddhism, the Four Noble Truths constitute the central tenets. They are:

1. The Noble Truth of suffering (*dukkha*)
2. The Noble Truth of the cause of suffering (*samudaya*)
3. The Noble Truth of the cessation of suffering (*nirodha*)
4. The Noble Truth of the path leading to the cessation of suffering (*magga*)

In the Fourth Noble Truth, Buddha taught the Noble Eightfold Path, namely: Right understanding, Right speech, Right action, Right livelihood, Right effort, Right awareness and Right concentration.

The Noble Eightfold Path comprises three aspects: moral conduct or self-discipline (*sila*), concentration or mental discipline (*samādhi*), and wisdom (*paññā*). This Noble Eightfold Path is the Buddhist Middle Way that avoids the two extremes of sensual lust and self-mortification. It is the only way that leads to enlightenment and deliverance from all suffering.

The Myanmar Middle Way is a practical application of the Buddhist Middle Way. The Myanmar Middle Way accepts the entire essence of the Buddhist Middle Way with its emphasis on the cessation of sufferings and realization of *Nibbana*. But the Buddha had also taught that this Middle Way is also the best means of living a good life in this mundane world as well. So, for the many, the Noble Eightfold Path is not only for those who aspire to *Nibbana* but to those who wish to live a good life in this world. If people abide by the tenets of the Noble Eightfold Path which is the Buddhist Middle Way, life in human society will be stable and harmonious. The Myanmar people emphasize this aspect of the Buddhist Middle Way. It can be said that a person can make beneficial use of this Middle Way in his personal and social life.

The significant characteristics of the Myanmar Middle Way are as follows.

1. Rejecting any extreme and dogmatic views
2. Encouraging creative judgments and moderation
3. Harmonizing morality and knowledge
4. Searching for unity in contradictions

5. Practicing ယောနိသော မနသိကာရ *yoniso manasikara* or thorough attention and accepting this world as a changing world

It can be said that the Myanmar Middle Way is one of the principles of the Myanmar way of thinking. Myanmar people are exhorted to use this way in their daily life and Myanmar Middle Way can be clearly seen by studying Myanmar proverbs.

Conclusion

The Myanmar Middle Way as a Basic Principle of the Myanmar Way of Thinking

It is clearly seen that the Myanmar way of thinking has its own significant characteristics and is different from both the Western way of thinking and other Eastern ways of thinking. It is often asserted that the ways of thinking of the Eastern peoples are synthetic, and that of the Westerners analytic.¹ It is a dogmatic view and we do not agree. In fact, Myanmar people are not only synthetic in their outlook but also analytic because they study the *Abhidhamma* literature of Theravada Buddhism by means of the analytical method. We cannot say that only Westerners have a tendency to be analytical.

By studying the above characteristics of Myanmar proverbs, it can be concluded that there must be a basic guiding principle to the Myanmar way of thinking. This principle is, what I would like to call, the **Myanmar Middle Way** based on the Buddhist Middle Way which is the Noble Eightfold Path. The Middle way of Buddhism requires avoiding the two extremes of sensual lust and self-mortification. Although Buddhist Middle Way leads to cessation of all sufferings and realization to *Nibbana*, the Myanmar Middle Way provides a guide to a good society. It can be said that a person can make beneficial use of this Middle Way in his personal and social life.

In Western philosophy, the Greek philosopher Aristotle proposed the **Golden Mean** as a guide to moral conduct which can be compared in some ways with Myanmar Middle Way. According to Golden mean, courage is thought as a mean between cowardice and foolhardiness. The good man is one who lives a life following to this Golden Mean, who does not go to extremes in action but balances one extreme against other. In Eastern philosophy, the Chinese philosopher Confucius also advocated the **Golden Rule** that does not

¹ Nakamura, H., (1964) Ways of Thinking of Eastern People, p-13

go to extremes. It suggests the fundamental moral idea of moderation, balance, and suitableness. So it can be said that the Golden Rule of Confucius is also a guide to morality.

In conclusion, I would like to say that though philosophers such as Aristotle and Confucius have advocated the path of moderation in moral conduct, the Myanmar Middle Way is more suitable for Myanmar society for it has been tested and tried through many years and it is most in keeping with the Myanmar character and the Myanmar culture. It can be said that Myanmar proverbs can continue to function in the Age of Knowledge, and by studying Myanmar proverbs we know that one of the basic principles of the Myanmar way of thinking is Myanmar Middle Way.

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မြန်မာစကားပုံ၊ ၁၉၉၆၊ မြန်မာစာအဖွဲ့ဦးစီးဌာန၊ ပညာရေးဝန်ကြီးဌာန၊ တက္ကသိုလ်များ
ပုံနှိပ်တိုက်၊ ရန်ကုန်