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Author	Dr Myat Mon Oo
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## **The Two Basic Laws: the Law of *Kamma* and the Law of Impermanence in Myanmar Way of Thinking**

Myat Mon Oo

### **Abstract**

The term 'Way 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. The way of thinking of a society is conditioned by its cultural habits and attitudes. It can be said that in the Myanmar way of thinking, there are two basic laws, namely, the law of *Kamma* and the law of Impermanence. This paper points out these two basic laws in the general tendency of the way of thinking of Myanmar people with reference to Myanmar literature.

**Key words:** way of thinking, the law of *Kamma*, the law of Impermanence

### **Introduction**

#### **The Nature of Way of Thinking**

Culture can be analyzed by two kinds of cultural phenomena: tangible or material culture and intangible or non-material culture. Tangible culture can be studied by physical evidences such as stone implements, ancient monuments, primitive works of art and crafts. Intangible culture can be studied by customs, beliefs, way of thinking, religious faiths, political thoughts, myths and legends etc. Accordingly, way of thinking is the intangible culture of a society.

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. 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 although individuals may think in slightly different ways. This paper will point out a general tendency of the thinking of Myanmar people.

### **The Nature of Myanmar Way of Thinking**

In Myanmar, Buddhist culture is the main foundation of Myanmar culture because most of Myanmar people are Theravada Buddhists. Myanmar people adopted the Theravada Buddhism in Pyu Era (1<sup>st</sup> century AD). As a clue to the principles of Myanmar way of thinking it is important to study how they modified Buddhism. Accordingly, Myanmar way of thinking is mainly reflected by Buddhist philosophy, which is considered to be the most highly developed and profoundly enlightening system of philosophy.

Since Shin Arahana and Great King Anawrahta (1044-1077 AD) had introduced Theravada Buddhism to Bagan, Myanmar people applied the essence of Buddhist philosophy to their daily life. The Law of *Kamma* and the Law of Impermanence are basic laws of Myanmar way of thinking. So Myanmar has its own way of thinking different from the West. Moreover, Myanmar way of thinking has its own specific characteristics which distinguish it from other Eastern ways of thinking.

In dealing with 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 reflected in Myanmar literature and proverbs.

The study of the history of world philosophy shows that there are two major trends of thought. They are:

1. The Nature-centric Tradition and
2. The Man-centric Tradition.

The thinkers of the nature-centric tradition look outwards and study the nature of external world. Their major interest is in the world and they consider its origin, its nature and its process. These philosophies can be found in the West. In ancient Greek Times, the Milesians were more interested in the problems of nature than that of human beings. They tried to solve the problem of the origin of the physical world, and asked questions dealing with this problem. The Greek Atomists considered that atoms were the origin and the substance of the world. They had the view that atoms, the indivisible units, are the ultimate constituents of physical objects.

Some Greek philosophers also asked the questions, 'Is the physical world changing or unchanging?' 'Is the physical world real or unreal?' So it can be called that they are the Nature-centric thinkers.

In the Man-centric tradition, philosophers think mainly of the problems dealing with religion and social problems. This kind of philosophy is the philosophy of man and it tries to solve the problems of man's life. Such views are found to be dominant in the history of oriental philosophy.

Oriental philosophers in general and, Indian and Chinese philosophers in particular, are interested in the problems of man. Some Indian philosophers like *Carvakas* think that the goal of all human beings is to enjoy all kinds of pleasure in this very life. Other Indian philosophers say that the ultimate objective of man is to get out of the wheel of life, which they call *Samsara*. Chinese philosophers also focus their attention on the problem of man. They asked such questions as 'What kind of man can be considered a good man in this life?', 'How do we live to enjoy physical and mental pleasures?' The Chinese philosophers in general are interested in the present life rather than the lives that are to come. The Japanese way of thinking also follows the same trend of thought.

In Myanmar, it can be said that Myanmar way of thinking is Man-centric thinking according to Myanmar proverbs and literatures through the Ages. However, Myanmar way of thinking is different from that of India or that of China on some fundamental points.

Nakamura, the Japanese philosopher, in his '**Ways of Thinking of Eastern Peoples**', writes,

"I believe that the various other peoples of the East have nearly the same ways of thinking as one or another of these four (India, China, Tibet and Japan). Specifically, one may say that Ceylon, Burma, Thailand, and Western Indo-China (Cambodia and Laos) are akin to India." (Nakamura, 1964)

Although Myanmar received Buddhism from India, it cannot be said exactly that Myanmar people have the same views as Indian people. Myanmar way of thinking differs from Indian way of thinking because Myanmar people are creative and they can do Myanmarization in their way of thinking.

Since the Bagan Period, Myanmar people have accepted Theravada Buddhism. Although this school of Buddhism came from India via Sri Lanka to Myanmar, Myanmar people have adopted it in order to make it flourish in the culture of their land. This is a significant character of Myanmar people. In his article '**Myanmar and Theravada**', Dr. Thein Zan (Nanda Thein Zan), Retired Professor/ Head of Philosophy Department, University of Yangon, says,

"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." ( Nanda Thein Zan, 1983)

"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 attain *Nibbana*. " (Nanda Thein Zan, 1983)

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

Here, there may be a question dealing with the distinction between Myanmar way of thinking and ways of thinking of other Theravada Buddhist countries. The countries that accept Theravada Buddhism do not have the same ways of thinking because of their different socio-cultural and historical backgrounds. They have unity in 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.

### **The Two Basic Laws in Myanmar Way of Thinking**

To do research on Myanmar way of thinking demands the systematic study of the ancient literature of Myanmar people. Myanmar literature has found its main source in Theravada Buddhism. From the '*Myazede*' stone inscription of Prince Raja Kumara in Bagan Period to the recent works of Ledi Sayadaw, most of the themes of Myanmar literature have their origin in Buddhism. Accordingly, it can be said that the source of Myanmar way of thinking is also Buddhism, especially Theravada Buddhism.



In Myanmar way of thinking, there are two basic laws namely, the Law of *Kamma* and the Law of Impermanence. The Law of *Kamma* is neither fatalism nor determinism. *Kamma* means all kinds of intentional actions whether mental, verbal or physical – thoughts, words, or deeds. The Law of Impermanence (*anicca*) means that things are vanishing and dissolving from moment to moment. All Myanmar Buddhists accept that *Sabbe sankhara anicca*. All conditioned things or phenomenal processes, mental as well as material, are transient or impermanent. This Law of Impermanence is not the result of any kind of metaphysical inquiry or of any mystical intuition. It is a straight forward judgment arrived at by investigation and analysis, and as such its basis is entirely empirical. The comprehension of impermanence is gained by direct meditative experience.

In the Myanmar poem ‘Myet-phye Linka’ it can be seen these two laws as follow.

မလွတ်ကြမ္မာ လူတကာတို့

ခန္ဓာခိုင်ကြည်အတည်မမြဲ ဖောက်လွဲတတ်သည်

မချွတ်စသာ သတ္တဝါတည်း။

I shall not escape my *kamma*

Man's stark-seeming body Lasteth not ever;

Verily it is the nature of every living thing to decay.

The Law of *Kamma* is that every action produces an effect, which becomes a cause in relation to another effect that comes afterwards. It is the law of cause and effect. *Kamma* depends on the efforts and strength of mental energy or *cetanā*. According to this law, our happiness and suffering are the natural outcome of our own good and bad thoughts, our own good and bad words as well as our own good and bad deeds. Ashin Thittila, *Aggamahapandita*, says,

“The past influences the present but does not dominate it, for *Kamma* is past as well as present. The past and present influence the future; the past is the background against which life goes on from moment to moment, the future is yet to be. Only the present moment exists, and the responsibility of using the present moment for good or for ill lies with each individual.” (Thittila, 1987)

This Buddhist conception of *Kamma* is different from the Hindu conception of *Karma*. Radhakrishnan, in his **Indian Philosophy**, writes of the Hindu conception of *Karma* as follows.

“The principle of *Karma* is not inconsistent with the reality of the absolute Brahman. The moral law of *Karma* is the expression of the nature of the absolute. Anthropomorphically we can say a divine power controls the process. . . . *Karma* refers to the unchanging action of the gods. It is an expression of the nature of reality.” (Blackwood, 1975)

So the Buddhist conception of *Kamma* based on *Anatta* (non-self) is different from the Hindu conception of *Karma* based on *Atta* (self). Buddhism does not accept any form of Creator or any form of substance, either physical or mental.

Concerning the law of Impermanence, the idea of change can be found in many Myanmar proverbs. Some are as follows.

၁. ဗုံလုံတလှည့် ငါးပျံတလှည့် The bonlon fruit and the mudskipper are on top of each other by turns.
၂. ရေစီးတခါ ရေသာတလှည့် Straining against the current sometimes and being under easy sail in calm waters by turns.
၃. သစ်ငုတ်မြင့်တုံ မြက်မြင့်တုံ The tree-stump and the grass come into prominence by turns.
၄. ယုန်ကျူးချည် ခွေးကျူးချည် Sometimes the rabbit re-passes and sometimes the dog does.
၅. ဆင်းရဲတခါ ချမ်းသာတလှည့် Misery alternates with well-being.
၆. အတက်ရှိမှ အဆင်းရှိ Only if there is ascent can there be descent.
၇. အသွားရှိမှ အလာရှိ Where there is a visit there is a return visit.

### Conclusion

As I have mentioned above, the two basic laws of Myanmar way of thinking are the Law of *Kamma* and the Law of Impermanence. The Law of *Kamma* is not the principle of pre-established harmony. Leibniz (1646-1716), German rationalist philosopher, espoused a brand of parallelism

through the use of a principle called pre-established harmony. He believes that the whole world is regulated by mathematical way of thinking. He postulates infinity of substance called 'monads', and the world is made up of the monads. No two monads are exactly alike, and each mirrors the universe in a slightly different way. There are two kinds of monads: the Supreme Monad and ordinary monads. Though there are infinite numbers of ordinary monads, there is only one Supreme Monad. The ordinary monads do not have any relations among themselves. The arrangements, which exist among them, are determined from the very beginning by the Supreme monad through the principle of pre-established harmony.

So the Law of *Kamma* in Myanmar way of thinking is different from any form of determinism. According to it, each and every living being has the power to self-create. 'What he is' is because of what he had done in the past and what he does in the present, and 'what he will be' will become by what he does in the present.

Concerning the Law of Impermanence Myanmar people believe that life is changing all the time. Life is nothing but a flux of cause and effect that is constantly changing. Buddha gave a metaphor of life as a flowing stream. Bertrand Russell, 20<sup>th</sup> century philosopher, also agreed with Buddhism. He said everything in the world is composed of "events." Events are not impenetrable, as matter is supposed to be; on the contrary, every event in space-time is overlapped by another event.

Heraclitus (6<sup>th</sup> BC), a Greek Philosopher, said the fluid nature of things. He explained the flux theory. He said that there is no static being, no unchanging substratum. Change or movement is the Lord of the Universe. He saw change as a connecting system between all things. All component things change. It is very similar to the idea of Buddhist Myanmar people. Heraclitus compared life with a river. He said that upon those who step into the same river different and ever-different waters flow down. Plato later took this doctrine to mean that all things are in constant flux, regardless how they appear to the senses.

In Myanmar way of thinking, to understand this impermanent characteristic of the world is very important. It is an essential tenet of Buddhist wisdom that whatever the nature of arising has the nature of ceasing. Here, the Myanmar conception of wisdom is different from the Western conception of wisdom. While Western conception of wisdom is



based on objects, reasoning, classification and definition, Myanmar conception of wisdom is based on morality, spiritual discipline and insight.

In conclusion, Myanmar way of thinking, unlike Western ways of thinking, has its own significant features. Moreover, it accepts the highest transcendental wisdom which is beyond all kinds of concepts and reasoning.

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