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# **The Seven Virtues in Myanmar Ethical Philosophy**

**Myat Mon Oo<sup>1</sup>**

## **Abstract**

The aim of this paper is to investigate the issue on whether the traditional idea of virtue in Myanmar is still living or not in this Age of Knowledge. The research question of this paper is why the seven virtues are still important in Myanmar society. This question may be best answered through the descriptive, evaluative and reflective methods. It will contribute that the traditional seven virtues as a guiding principle may be a positive and supporting factor to build our modern democracy society.

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## **Introduction**

In this Age, globalization generated by the advancement of science and technology has reduced the world into a global village. Since globalization is a many-faceted process, this paper will focus only on the moral aspect of globalization. From the standpoint of morality, globalization is a process that replaces the existing traditional national moral norms with global moral norms. These two kinds of moral norms are interrelated. The global moral norms cannot come into force in a society without the support of the traditional national moral norms of that society. The traditional national moral norms of a society cannot be effectively practiced unless it can go hand in hand with global moral norms. Accordingly, it is very important to specify the traditional national norms of a society while globalization is still in the making.

### **The Moral Aspect of Globalization**

The moral life of a society is not a simple phenomenon. It consists of at least three components:

1. Moral codes or moral commandments,
2. Moral principles or ethics and
3. Moral habits or virtues.

In these three components, moral codes or moral commandments play a central role. Some believe that they are the commands given by God and some believe that they are the products of the long experience of a society as well as the embodiment of wisdom. These moral codes or moral commandments in every society are not systematically organized. The people accept and practice them without asking questions.

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<sup>1</sup> Professor (Head), Dr., Department of Philosophy, University of Mandalay

Only scholars analyze and reflect over them with a view to finding out principles. These principles justify and organize them. Such a study of moral codes or moral commandments is called 'Ethics'. Ethics constitutes the theoretical aspect of moral codes or moral commandments. The main task of ethics is to find a ground that can intellectually justify the moral codes or moral commandments.

In addition to this theoretical aspect, moral life also has another aspect. This aspect is a practical aspect; its main task is to make the moral codes or moral commandments work. This aspect of the moral life is called 'virtue'.

### What Virtue Is

The word 'virtue' is derived from the Latin word '*virtus*' and the Greek word '*arete*'. *Virtus* means 'manliness' and '*arete*' means 'excellence'. Among the Greeks and Romans, as well as early Christians, virtue was generally seen as that part of character that allowed one to live a good life- indeed, without which the good life was impossible.<sup>2</sup>

According to the American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language, the word 'virtue' means moral excellence and righteousness.<sup>3</sup> Virtues are attitudes, dispositions, or character traits. Examples of virtues are honesty, courage, compassion, generosity, fidelity, integrity, fairness, self-control, and prudence.

Virtue is of two kinds: intellectual and moral. Intellectual virtue owes both its inception and its growth chiefly to instruction, and for this very reason needs time and experience. Moral goodness, on the other hand, is the result of habit, from which it has actually got its name, being a slight modification of the word *ethos*. This fact makes it obvious that none of the moral virtues is engendered in us by nature, since nothing that is what it is by nature can be made to behave differently by habituation.

The moral virtues are engendered in us neither by nor contrary to nature; we are constituted by nature to receive them, but their full development in us is due to habit. Since virtue is a purposive disposition, lying in a mean that is relative to us and determined by a rational principle, and by that which a prudent man would use to determine it. It is a mean between two kinds of vice, one of excess and the other of deficiency; and also for this reason, that whereas these vices fall short of or exceed the right measure in both feelings and actions, virtue discovers the mean and chooses it.

The virtues are habits of deliberate choice. To be virtuous means to have a character so developed that we habitually choose to act in the right way.

In ancient Greek philosophy, there are four cardinal virtues. They are

1. Wisdom or Prudence
2. Courage or Fortitude
3. Temperance or Self-Restraint and
4. Justice or Righteousness

<sup>2</sup> Rohmann Chris. (2002). *The Dictionary of Important Ideas and Thinkers*. London: Arrow.P-421

<sup>3</sup> *The American Heritage Dictionary*, Fifth Edition. Online

According to Aristotle, in order to pursue any of these virtues perfectly, one would have to master them all. For example, in order to be just, one must be wise. The thesis of the unity of the virtues is controversial. For Aristotle, a virtue is an excellence, a character trait that is essential to happiness, getting along with other people, and living well in general.

The opposite of a virtue is a vice. One way of organizing the vices is as the corruption of the virtues. Thus the cardinal vices would be folly, venality, cowardice and lust. However, the virtues can have several opposites. Virtues can be considered the ones between two extremes. For instance, the opposites of courage are cowardice and rashness. The contrary to prudence are both over-caution and insufficient caution. The virtue 'tolerance' can be considered the mean between the two extremes of narrow-mindedness on the one hand and soft-headedness on the other. Therefore, vices can be identified as the opposites of virtues, but with the caveat that each virtue could have many different opposites, all distinct from each other.

In Eastern philosophy, Chinese virtues include humanity, *Hsiao* usually translated as filial piety, and *Chung* meaning loyalty. One important normative value in much of Chinese thinking is that one's social status should be the result of the amount of virtue that one could demonstrate rather than by one's birth. According to Confucius (557-479 BC), perfect virtue consists of the global practice of five things: gravity, generosity of soul, sincerity, earnestness and kindness. His famous virtues are *Jen* (benevolence), *Yi* (righteousness), *Li* (proper rite), *Zhi* (knowledge), and *Xin* (integrity). His aim is how people might live harmoniously together.

The roots of *Jen* are piety (*Hsiao*) and obedience (*Ti*). These are the qualities that characterized the ideal man (*Chun-tzu*). The piety called for is the veneration of parents by children, and the obedience that of the younger brother to the older, whether within a family or in the community generally; thus respect for the old became a central feature of the Chinese cultural tradition.<sup>4</sup>

### Traditional Myanmar Virtues

In Myanmar way of thinking, there are seven cardinal virtues. They are (1) *Saddhā* (Faith or confidence, based on reason and rooted in understanding and knowledge), (2) *Sila* (Moral conduct), (3) *Suta* (Knowledge), (4) *Paññā* (Wisdom) (5) *Cāga* (Generosity), (6) *Hiri* (Moral shame), and (7) *Ottappa* (Moral dread).

In Magadeva Linkar, Manle Sayadaw writes,

"*Saddhā*, *Sila*, *Suta*, *Paññā*, *Cāga*, *Hiri* and *Ottappa* are the seven properties of the virtuous. The virtuous should know the seven properties of the virtuous meticulously and looking forward with wisdom."<sup>5</sup>

*Saddhā* means confidence and it denotes abiding conviction in the Three Gems (Buddha, His Teachings and His Disciples), and the belief that beings are heirs to their own volitional actions, both in this existence and in the hereafter. A

<sup>4</sup> Billington, Ray. (2003). *Understanding Eastern Philosophy*. London: Routledge. p- 12

<sup>5</sup> မနုလည်ဆရာတော်၊ (၂၀၁၂)၊ မဟာသုတကာရီ၊ မဃဒေဝလင်္ကာသစ်၊ ရန်ကုန်၊ မန်လည်စာပေ၊ စာ-၄၁၂

clear and incisive way of perception is the chief attribute of what is meant by the word 'conviction'. *Saddhā* is not a blind faith. The *Saddhā* placed by a follower in the Buddha is like that of a sick man towards his physician or that of a student towards his teacher. 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 follow the Buddha's teachings in order to deliverance.

*Sila* or moral conduct is the principle of human behavior that promotes orderly and peaceful existence in a community. It denotes being virtuous, and abstaining from evil actions both physical and verbal.

*Suta* or knowledge and *Paññā* or wisdom are also valued in Myanmar society. Wisdom is insight and it is higher level of knowledge. There are many Myanmar proverbs extolling the benefits of knowledge. Among them, one is that 'Knowledge is a gold jar that thieves cannot steal'. Wisdom is the power of seeing what things truly are and how to act rightly when the problems of life come before us. Wisdom enables a man to see things as they truly are, and perceive the right way to peace. Western conception of wisdom is based on objects, reasoning, classifications and definitions but Myanmar conception of wisdom is based on morality and spiritual discipline.

*Caga* or generosity highlights the practice of giving, not as the outwardly manifest act by which an object is transferred from oneself to others, but as the inward disposition to give, a disposition which is strengthened by outward acts of giving and which in turn makes possible still more demanding acts of self-sacrifice. Myanmar people are friendly and hospitable because of the spirit of generosity that has been instilled in them through the generations.

*Hiri* or moral shame means being ashamed to commit immoral acts. *Ottappa* or moral dread means fear of consequences from committing an immoral deed. They are usually interpreted as respect for oneself and respect for others. *Hiri* and *Ottappa* are also principles that guard the mankind. Lacking them, humanity would sink to the level of animals, bringing about utter chaos.

In Myanmar culture, a person who has these seven virtues is called a virtuous person. *Loka Niti* by Minister Caturangabala (Pinya Era, 14 century) guided the people in the affairs of the world.

In this world, sandalwood gives off pleasant smell. The moon is more pleasant than sandalwood. Much more pleasant is the word of the virtuous person.<sup>6</sup>

Lions, though hungry will not eat grass. The learned and virtuous, though faces with poverty, will not accept vice but always upholds virtue.<sup>7</sup>

The importance of the virtues, knowledge and wisdom can be also found in *Loka Niti* as follows.

Never think of knowledge and wisdom as little. Seek it  
and store it in the mind. Note that ant-hills are built with small

<sup>6</sup> Caturangabala. (2013). *Loka Niti*, section-the good man, (Translated by Tet Toe) Yangon: Tet Toe Sarpay. p-50

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p-47

particles of dust, and incessantly falling raindrops, when collected, can fill a big pot.<sup>8</sup>

One without knowledge becomes others' worker. One who has knowledge is honored by others. So strive daily to get knowledge.<sup>9</sup>

These seven virtues still provide guiding principles to a good life for the Myanmar people. Theravada Buddhism arrived to Myanmar since the Pyu Era (1<sup>st</sup> century AD) and flourished from the time of King Anawrahta who reigned AD 1044-1088. Then Theravada Buddhism has been a great influence in all aspects of Myanmar life.

### Conclusion

This paper is to present the issue on whether these traditional virtues can be practiced once globalization has taken its roots in our societies. We have to select and wherever necessary reinterpret the traditional virtues so that these traditional virtues can continue to function in the age of globalization. This kind of study requires what philosopher John Dewey calls reflection. In quenching our thirst, water is mere incident; in practicing of our traditional virtues, traditional virtues are mere incidents. In the light of globalization, we have to reflect on traditional virtues, as we have to reflect on water when water is our controlling interest.

In fact, not only Confucius but also most of the philosophers in the East are interested more in moral character than moral acts because the primary objective of the study of morality in the East is to change the characters of man rather than to understand the nature of moral codes. Therefore, ethics in the East is very closely associated with practical life whereas ethics in the West has now become so theoretical. However, this does not mean that the Western way of thinking in moral life is not relevant to our moral situations.

We can take the Age of Feudalism into consideration in which most of our traditional virtues have their roots as well as Modern age, which gives rise to the emergence of globalization. In the Age of Feudalism, the centre of social relation was the family. An individual had meaning in life only as a member of a family. Therefore, the virtues that were cultivated in this age were of feudalistic virtues. In Modern age the centre of social relationship has been shifted from the family to the individual. The basic social relationship is between the individuals and his nation state. An individual is meaningful, when he belongs to a state. An individual who has lost his place in a nation has also lost his meaning in his life.

Keeping such a background in mind we can envisage the Age of globalization. In this Age, the basic social relation will be not between the individual and the family or between the individual and the state but between the individual and the humanity as a whole. Moral virtues, both in the East and the West are something that man has to cultivate in him according to his time and place. However, this does not imply that all virtues change with the changing of time and place. There are cardinal virtues some of which can transcend the barriers of time and place. It seems to me that some virtues in the practice of Seven Myanmar Virtues can be practiced regardless of the changing of time and place.

Since our age is characterized as the Age of Knowledge, we need the

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., section-the sage, p-6

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., p-17

mental values such as Virtues because science and technology gives us power but not direction and it can make us strong but not kind-hearted. Since man has physical life as well as mental life, he needs science and technology for his physical life and he also needs mental values for his mental life. Our Oriental Philosophies can fulfill the need of man's mental life.

In conclusion, although the Eastern philosophy and Western philosophy are different in their specific characteristics, one can provide the needs of the other vice versa. In order to search the orchestrated unity and harmony of World philosophy, our Eastern philosophies share our methods of power of mind and morality with other societies. So our Eastern philosophies play the active and important role among the World philosophies. Our ideas of Virtues that are our cultural heritage still provide guiding principles to a good life not only for us but also for all human beings.

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