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The Cultivated Spirit of Buddhist Altruism through Education

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ABSTRACT

One can say that Buddhism is an altruistic religion even though its being may not follow the Western definition of “religion”. The essence of Buddhism is the spirit of altruism. All three denominations of Buddhism, Theravāda, Mahāyāna and Vajrayāna, encourage all Buddhists to work for the sake of other beings. The Buddhist altruistic characteristics are composed of loving kindness (mettā), compassion (karunā), wisdom (paññā), loving interest

(chanda) and self-knowledge (attaññutā). Those who possess an altruistic spirit are always socially engaged. There are many socially engaged Buddhists and Buddhist groups in Thailand today who work for the good of human beings, animals and natural environments. Their work is worth mentioning and can be taken as examples for others. The inspiration and cultivation of the spirit of Buddhist altruism can be made through education, e.g. establishment of the spirit of Buddhist courses based on seminars and field work in academic institutions, encouragement of Buddhist knowledge and training in socially engaged activities and cooperation of Buddhist institutions for the development of Buddhist altruism in practice.

1. Introduction

Buddhism can be taken as an altruistic religion. It is a “religion” because its followers are bound to certain ways of life, beliefs, and commitment, not to God or any supernatural beings. It is “altruistic” because its teachings require work and practices for both oneself and others. Since Buddhism was established for the good of all beings, one needs to learn more about its teachings and cultivate more of its altruistic spirit.

1.1 Buddhism and the Specific Meaning of Religion

“Religion” comes from a Latin word “religare” which means “to bind fast.” The meaning refers to the bondage of religious members and their religious institutions. There religious members are required to follow their religious teachings and practices in order to attain God or their religious ideal.ⁱ The meaning of “religion” has been developed in time and places. For example, Émile Durkheim (1858 – 1917), a French Sociologist, explained that “religion” was a system of unified beliefs and practices of “the sacred” which is everything respected and worshipped by human beings, e.g., teachings, texts, objects of belief, and ceremonies.ⁱⁱ Hence, Buddhism can be classified as a religion in this respect.

1.2 The Spirit of Altruism : A Buddhist Essence

The meaning of altruism implies regard for and devotion to the interests of others, even to the sacrifice of personal interests.ⁱⁱⁱ The spirit of altruism is an essence of Buddhism

of all denominations, i.e., Theravāda, Mahāyāna, and Vajrayāna. In Theravāda tradition, we learn that the altruistic spirit is based on wisdom and compassion. Through wisdom, we penetrate the truth of life that everything is subject to change in the cycle of birth and death and depends on the Law of Cause and Effect. Knowledge of the truth of life can free one from self-attachment and suffering. The Buddha thus decided to preach the Fourfold Noble Truth to others after his enlightenment. Moreover, he told his monk disciples to take a long journey in order to preach to people in different places for their good and happiness. Even the Buddha himself had never stopped preaching throughout his life. By means of the Buddha's wisdom and compassion, we have a chance to free ourselves from all defilements and attain the Liberation from Suffering (Nibbāna). Similarly, through our wisdom and compassion, we realize that all beings are subject to the cycle of birth and death and thus suffer in their lives. It is thus our duty as Buddhists to free ourselves from suffering as well as to reveal to others, with compassion, the way out of suffering. The evidence is shown in the mendicant ideal of monks taught by the Buddha to his monk disciples as follows:

Any priest, O priests, who in teaching the Doctrine to others thinks as follows:

“The Doctrine has been well taught by the Blessed One, avails even in the present life, is immediate in its results, is inviting and conducive to salvation, and may be mastered by any intelligent man for himself. O that they may hear from me the Doctrine, and be enlightened by what they hear, and as a result of their enlightenment begin to act accordingly!” and thus teaches the Doctrine to others because of that Doctrine's intrinsic goodness, and because of compassion, mercy, and kindness, such a priest, O priests, is a worthy teacher of the Doctrine.^{iv}

In Mahāyāna Buddhism, wisdom and compassion play essential roles in Bodhisattvas' practices. In Vajradhvaṅga Sūtra, a bodhisattva declares his resolution as follows:

I have made the vow to save all beings. All beings I must set free. The whole world of living beings I must rescue, from terrors of birth, of old age, of sickness, of death and rebirth, of all kinds of moral offence, of all states of woe, of the whole cycle of birth-and-death, of the jungle of false views, of the loss of wholesome dharmas, of the concomitants of ignorance,- from all these terrors I must rescue all beings.^v

Here, in the light of wisdom, the Bodhisattva can penetrate the truth that all beings suffer from their experiences of lives in their cycle of birth and death. Such knowledge initiates compassion in the heart of a bodhisattva and encourages him/her to work for their good.

Similarly, Tibetan Buddhism or Vajrayāna takes the same standpoint. Wisdom and compassion are necessary for releasing all world beings from suffering. Some explanations in the salutation to Vajrasattva Buddha are shown as follows:

The non-substantiality of things which is realized by reflection and by discrimination between the act of knowing and what is known, is called the essence of Wisdom.

Because one is passionately devoted to all beings who have failed to extricate themselves from a whole flood of suffering, this passionate devotion of which their suffering is the cause is known as Compassion. In that one thereby brings a man to the desired end by a combination of appropriate measures; it is also called the means.^{vi}

The spirit of altruism supported by the Buddha's teachings and the Buddhist texts significantly promotes altruistic characteristics of Buddhists.

2. The Altruistic Characteristics in Buddhism

The altruistic characteristics are those qualities and expressions for the sake of others, e.g., be willing to help others, be public-spirited, and be less egoistic. The Buddhist altruistic characteristics are composed of loving kindness (*mettā*), compassion (*karuṇā*), wisdom (*paññā*), loving interest (*chanda*), and self-knowledge (*attaññutā*).

2.1 Loving Kindness (*mettā*) is a friendly thought and action toward others. It is a pure love for human beings and animals who are clearly seen as friends of sufferers in the cycle of birth and death. Loving kindness encourages Buddhists to try to make others happy and thus lessen their own selfishness.

Loving kindness is a basis virtue for a teacher or a preacher in Theravada tradition. Venerable P.A. Payutto, an eminent Buddhist monk and scholar in Thailand today, explains that a teacher/ preacher should be endowed with 5 qualities of instruction:

2.1.1 *Anupubbikatham* (The instruction is regulated and gradually developed)

2.1.2 *Pariyāyadassāvī* (The instruction consists of good reasoning)

2.1.3 *Anudayatam paṭicca* (The instruction is based on loving kindness)

2.1.4 *Na āmisantaro* (The instruction is not for worldly gain)

2.1.5 *Anupahacca* (The instruction does neither hurt oneself nor others)^{vii}

These qualities of instruction can be fulfilled by means of loving kindness.

2.2 **Compassion** (*karuṇā*) is a goodwill and good intention in order to save others from trouble. Buddhist teachings encourage all Buddhists to be compassionate for both friends and enemies. According to Theravāda teachings, the Buddhist saints (Arahant) are those who possess the highest and greatest compassion. Their minds are free from all defilements and suffering. They thus are able to fully perceive thoughts and feelings of others. They clearly know about others' suffering and needs. Hence, they are willing to devote themselves for the good of others. For example, Maha Kassapa, an Arahant who proffered being in seclusion, gathered other arahants/ Buddhist saints to work on the Buddhadhamma in the First Buddhist Council in order to preserve the Buddha's teachings.

In Mahāyāna Buddhism and Vajrayāna Buddhism, it is well known and widely accepted that all bodhisattvas are perfected with compassion to other beings. Some verses of devotion to Avalokitesvara Bodhisattva are the evidence of his compassion as follows:

As he who has reached perfection in all virtues,
Who looks on all beings with pity and friendliness,
Who is virtue itself, a great ocean of virtues,
As such Avalokitesvara is worthy of adoration.
He who is now so compassionate to the world,
He will a Buddha be in future ages.
Humbly I bow to Avalokitesvara
Who destroys all sorrow, fear and suffering.^{viii}

In order to cultivate compassion in one's mind, one needs to clear one's mind from defilements as much as one can. Those who are drowned in misery and worldly bondage themselves can surely not understand others' problems and thus cannot be altruistic to them.

2.3 **Wisdom** (*paññā*) is the mental capacity to penetrate the truth of the world that all things are under the Law of Cause and Effect / the Law of Kamma. Nothing is permanent. All things depends on their causes and can perish one day according to their causes. Thus, they are not worth clinging to. Wisdom reminds us that the world is full of suffering and all world beings suffer from their existence. It is the duty of the wise and the virtuous to help all sufferers. Besides, wisdom assists the Bodhisattvas and the virtuous to use right methods to save the sufferers. In other words, wisdom support the Bodhisattvas to fulfill their virtuous duty as revealed in the *Mahāvastu*:

With knowledge as their banner they are untiring in speech and skilled in teaching. Being of irreproachable character they are immune from disaster. They are free from sin. They shun the threefold distractions. Leaving vain babblers alone, they love their enemies. They do not indulge in sexual pleasures. They know how to win the affection of all creatures. When they enter the world they have become endowed with powers that are in accordance with the vow they have made. In all matters they are skilled in the knowledge of correct and faulty conclusions. They are rich in goodness and blessed with good qualities. Eminent, wise in their illimitable virtue, are serene among their fellows.^{ix}

2.4 Loving Interest (*chanda*) is a good will and loving kindness toward things apart from human beings and animals, e.g., trees, mountains, and physical environments. If we are with loving interest, we will enjoy the beauty of nature and do not want to destroy nature or take any natural object for our own belonging. Loving interest is opposite to egoism and thus encourages those who are with it to work for the good of natural environments.

2.5 Self-Knowledge (*attaññutā*) is the knowledge of one's own self. Through self-knowledge, a person clearly see his/her own position and capacity. S/he can penetrate the truth of his/her own self. Finally, s/he understands that s/he cannot live only for his/her own good. His/her life is under the law of cause and effect and depends on its conditions. When s/he experiences pain and unhappiness, s/he then realizes that others are also subject to the same fate. His/her altruistic spirit thus arises. Self-knowledge reveals to us that all beings share suffering in these vicissitudes of life and thus need care and assistance.

3. The Spirit of Buddhist Altruism and Some Socially Engaged Buddhists in Thailand Today

Socially engaged Buddhism is a Buddhist way of life which is composed of thoughts and practices initiated by Buddhist conscience that a religion cannot be alienated from a society. Buddhism, as well, was established in a social context and had been supported by social members. Thus, Buddhists should carry on their duty to cherish and protect their Buddhist community at their best. Moreover, they should look after their natural environments and social composite in which they live and take part.

Socially engaged Buddhists are aware that they belong and owe their good lives to their social members. They thus need to return them with good assistance and services. Their roles are not only limited within believing and practicing the Buddhist doctrine but also extended to social working for the sake of others, e.g., propagating the Buddhist teachings for the solution of social violence, promoting the Bodhisattva's morality in politicians, and so on. There are many socially engaged Buddhists and Buddhists groups in Thailand today who work for the good of human beings, animals, and natural environments. Their work is worth mentioning and can be taken as some examples for others.

3.1 His Majesty King Bhumibol Adulyadej of Thailand

His Majesty King Bhumibol Adulyadej of Thailand today is revered as a Bodhisattva by Thai People. He is highly respected as a social engaged Buddhist king who is perfected with the ten royal virtues : 1) Charity (dāna) 2) High moral character (sīla) 3) Self-sacrifice (pariccāga) 4) Honesty (ājjava) 5) Kindness and gentleness (maddava) 6) Self-control (tapa) 7) Hatred –less (akkodha) 8) Non-violence (avihiṃsā) 9) Tolerance (khanti) 10) Conformity to the Dhamma (avirodhana). The ten royal virtues are based on the Buddha's teaching in the Buddhist Scriptures (the Tipiṭaka). They are obviously seen in his work and social activities for the people throughout his life.

His Majesty has initiated many projects for the better lives of his people. For example, he introduced “the New Theory” to farmers in order to solve problems of drought and lack of water. The New Theory works for keeping balance between nature and human way of life. It guides farmers to divide the land into 4 parts. The first part about 30% of the land is used for water storage by digging a pond where fish are kept and water is used in the dry season. The second part, 30% of the land is used for growing rice which yields food to the family during the whole year. The third part, 30% of the land, is used for growing vegetable and fruit plants for eating and selling. The fourth part which is 10% of the land is used for building a house, raising animals and growing small plants. Through this management of land, farmers will be able to live sufficiently and overcome all difficulties throughout their lives.^x

Besides, His Majesty also presented the Theory of Sufficient Economy to Thai people when the country suffered from economic deterioration. Primarily, he expected to save people in lower social status, e.g., farmers and labourers, from poverty. At present, he would rather have his theory followed by all Thai people who want to attain sustainable happiness.

Sufficient economy promotes self-reliance of a person. A person who is economically secure can survive and help others. The practical dimension of the sufficient economy aims at economic sustainability of one's community through living in moderation. It is not to be mistaken as a form of localism which is the antagonistic view to modern capitalism. In fact, sufficient economy can be applied to all levels of life, e.g., lives of local, town, lower class and middle class people. It stresses on the "middle path" (the middle of the two extremities). His Theory of Sufficient Economy was recommended by the United Nations (UN) which honoured him with the Human Development Lifetime Achievement Award in May 26, B.E. 2549 (C.E. 2006). In the UN Lecture in honor of His Majesty, the Theory of Sufficient Economy was praised as a worthy theory for Thailand and all nations. In addition, the United Nations encourages its 166 nation members to apply this Theory to their sustainable development. Obviously, His Majesty's role as a socially engaged Buddhist is the outcome of his loving kindness and compassion to his people.

3.2 Phra Pisal Visalo

Phra Pisal Visalo is a well-known socially engaged Buddhist monk in Thailand today. He is the author of many books such as *The Position and Fate of Human Beings in the Computer Age* (in Thai) and *Making Merit with Wisdom* (in Thai). He is an organizer of the Religious Group for Society which promotes the roles of monks and laypeople in working for human right, social equality and political justice. He criticizes the monastic preceptors for their inefficiency of being good teachers and their failure to train novices. Moreover, he encourages the establishment of the Bhikkhunī (female monks) Order in Thailand which is against the Rule of the Thai Sangha.^{xi}

In addition while most Thai Buddhists make merits through financial donation and giving things to others, Phra Pisal suggests merit makings without money but working for social benefits instead, e.g., feeding orphans in a nursery, visiting old people in an Old People's Home and being volunteers in a temple.^{xii}

At present, Phra Pisal's socially engaged Buddhist work is on the Project for the Development of Intellectual Health which promotes happiness through right views. He explains that Thai people, generally, take 4 wrong views which lead to their woes : 1) To be egoistic 2) To attach to materialistic pleasure 3) To long for good gains and uncertain luck. 4) To overlook proper methods of thinking. He then suggests 4 right views : 1) To be altruistic

2) To search for other sources of pleasure and happiness, e.g., doing good to others and enjoying useful work. 3) To be self-reliance 4) To be sensible.^{xiii}

According to Phra Pisal, when we help others out of suffering and make them happy, we will be free from suffering and gain happiness too. The Project for the Development of Intellectual Health is publicized by its activities, e.g., training and working among participants and members. It reaches the public through regular lectures and printed materials.

3.3 The National Elephant Institute in Lampang Province, Thailand

The National Elephant Institute in Lampang Province, Thailand, was established when some authorities in Lampang Province had cooperated with the Forest Industry Organization in returning elephants to the forest at Doi Pha Muang Wildlife Sanctuary in Lampang. Since then, the staff members of the National Elephant Institute have offered to take care of the released elephants in the Sanctuary. It should be noted that, in the old days, elephants were taken from the forest to be trained to work in villages. Nowadays, it is illegal to trap an elephant and force it to work for people.

In Thailand, though people are generally faithful Buddhists and much compassionate for animals, they began to speak for animals and took active roles for the good of animals and natural environments about 10 years ago. Formerly, the Bangkok Municipal Officers killed hundreds of stray dogs everyday in order to get rid of hydrophobia or rabies. At present, the Municipality encourages people to sterilize all dogs and cats so that the number of them will be lessen and their owners will be able to take care of them. In addition, many years ago, when an elephant hurt or killed people during its rutting season, local officers usually solved the problem by killing him. Now, the method is changed due to more information of the good of elephants and the Buddhist teachings of loving kindness and compassion toward others. If elephants destroy some orchards and crops of villagers, they will be chased and guided back to the forest by forest officers. The loss of anything happened by the attack of the elephants will be compensated by the government.

Formerly, the National Elephant Institute was only the Young Elephant Training Center. It became the Thai Elephant Conservation Center and upgraded to the National Elephant Institute under the Patronage of Her Royal Highness Princess Galyani Vadhana Krom Luang Naradhiwas Rajanagarindra in C.E. 2002.^{xiv}

The National Elephant Institute is responsible for providing care for and protecting elephants. It also serves as a center for research and study in elephants as well as a training site for

veterinary students. The Institute conducts some studies in order to make use of elephant dung in producing fertilizer, biogas for cooking, and Sa paper which can be used to produce various utensils and souvenirs such as diaries, lanterns, umbrellas, and hats. It also offers a home stay service for both Thai and international tourists and other people who are interested in attending a course to become amateur mahouts. Here, visitors are provided with opportunities to learn about Thai culture, the lifestyle of mahouts and elephant rising and training for a few days.

In the National Elephant Institute, there are an Elephant Hospital and veterinarians who cure sick elephants from both inside and outside the country. The Institute takes care of elephants free of charge. In order to raise funding, it has launched the Foster Parent Project in order to seek donations for food and medicine for elephants. Besides, Her Majesty Queen Sirikit has initiated a mobile veterinarian project in the Forest Industry Organization which is responsible for sending veterinarians to cure sick elephants and provide medical check-ups for elephants throughout the country.^{xv}

The belief that the elephants are symbolic and national animals of Thailand was originated formerly when they help our warriors to protect the country. Since then, their pictures had appeared in Thai national flags for many years.

3.4 The Thai Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (TSPCA)

The Thai Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (TSPCA) was established in C.E. 1994. This Society attempts to protect animals from all forms of cruelty and solve the problems of cruelty with peace. It uses all forms of public relation in order to spread news, information, and understanding so that people of all ages can be conscious of values of animals, be merciful to them, and work together in order to protect them from all harms. This Society is an associate member of the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals of the United Kingdom. It also took part in the movement for animal rights in Thailand which resulted in the Announcement of the Royal Decree against Cruelty to Animals in C.E. 2014. Those who transgress the Law may be punished in jail for up to 2 years or be fined up to 40,000 baht (1,212 U.S. dollars). This Animal Protection Act asserts that animals can suffer as human beings and should be treated with loving kindness and compassion.

The work of these socially engaged Buddhists and groups yields much benefit to the social members and is worth supporting by the public through education and cooperation. There are,

in fact, many volunteer Buddhists and Buddhist groups in Thailand and in many other countries. Those mentioned earlier are only few among many. If their work are made known, studies, and followed, all the unfortunate and the sufferers will be finally saved.

4. Conclusion : How to Cultivate the Spirit of Buddhist Altruism through Education

In order to implement the spirit of Buddhist altruism in our practical lives, we need to work more on our educational system and activities.

4.1 Establishment of Some Buddhist Courses Based on Seminars and Field Work in Academic Institutions

According to the assumption that Buddhist teachings support moral values beneficial to the good of people and the whole society, some Buddhist courses, e.g., Seminar on Buddhist Ethics, Special Topics in Buddhist Activities, and Seminar and Workshop on Socially Engaged Buddhism, should be offered to students in colleges and universities. Students need to be oriented to the spirit of Buddhist altruism and encouraged to participate in some activities which assist them to understand more of their social lives.

4.2 Encouragement of Buddhist Knowledge and Training in Socially Engaged Activities

Special programs and training should be offered to students and other participants in order to be more capable in Buddhist knowledge and socially engaged activities. These programs may be managed with field trips to some places, e.g., Old People's Homes, Hospice Care Centers, Stray Animals Camps, and some Buddhist hermitages in order to initiate loving kindness and compassion toward others.

4.3 Cooperation of Buddhist Institutions for the Development of Buddhist Altruism in Practices

Buddhist colleges, universities, and institutions of all kinds need to cooperate with one another to realize their Buddhist knowledge in practices. They should exchange ways of thinking and methods of practices with one another in order to develop their Buddhist altruism for the best of other beings. The World Buddhist University (WBU) always attempts to share and to cooperate with other institutions in Buddhist knowledge and activities in order to spread Buddhism for the betterment of the entire world. We believe that if people are more cultivated with Buddhist altruism, they will be helpful to others and live with others, human beings, animals, and the entire environments, in peaceful happiness.

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