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Serving Others, a Lost Tradition

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ABSTRACT

Tradition of serving in Indonesian Buddhist community is relatively less popular compared to other religious communities. Probably it is due to the few number of Buddhists (less than 1% of the population), or lack of people who care. Buddhist-owned orphanages, hospitals, cost-sharing clinics, schools, are still merely dreams. Serving is one of the ten good karmas which bring virtues. The view of "as long as not harming others" is not enough to represent Buddhist attitude, since the teachings of the Buddhas recommend three attitudes: non-harming, serving, and purifying mind. If a religion intends to grow, it has to focus on serving. Any institution or community which has low capability in serving each other, will be abandoned by its members and will gain no interest from others. Thus, "proactive serving" will attract people, and in turn those who were served well will be inspired to serve, and furthermore

relayed the tradition of serving. Buddhism had an image of being a passive, escapist religion, dealing only with self-salvation and lacked caring attitude. Some Buddhists had taken initiative to launch a movement to display this religion to be more proactive, serving-oriented and socially sensitive. Humanistic Dharma movement is a significant example to build Bodhicitta character: energetic, compassionate and wise personality, for the good and happiness of the many. Any true spiritual maturity will naturally grow non-discrimination love

Fast Facts about Buddhism in Indonesia

Buddhism arrived in Indonesia around the 2nd century. Indonesian archipelago has witnessed the rise and fall of powerful Buddhist empires such as the Sailendra (8th-9th century) with its Borobudur, Srivijaya (8th-12th century) which served as a Buddhist learning center in the region, and Majapahit (13th-15th century), the last and greatest empire in Southeast Asia.

By the end of the 16th century, Islam had supplanted Hinduism and Buddhism as the dominant religions in Java and Sumatra. After about 500 years, there is no significant Buddhist practice in Indonesia. Many Buddhist sites, stupas, temples, and manuscripts are lost or forgotten as the region is dominated by Moslem.

During this era of decline, there were only a small number of people who still practices Buddhism, most of them are Chinese immigrants that settled in Indonesia during the migration wave in the 17th century. Many “kelenteng” (Chinese temples) in Indonesia are in fact a “Tridharma” temple that houses three faiths, Buddhism, Confucianism and Taoism.

In 1934, Narada Thera, a missionary monk from Sri Lanka, visited Indonesia for the first time as part of his journey to spread the Dharma in Southeast Asia. This opportunity was used by a few local Buddhists to revive Buddhism in Indonesia. A bodhi tree planting ceremony was held in Borobudur under the blessing of Narada Thera, and some were ordained as monks.¹

According to the 2010 National Census, roughly 0.72% of the total population of Indonesia were Buddhists and they numbered around 1.7 million.² Buddhism is mainly followed by the ethnic Chinese and some indigenous groups (Javanese, Sasak, Dayak). This group of Sasak and Dayak are recognized as Buddhists by the Indonesian government. They are untouched by Islamic influence and worship animistic gods, incorporating some Hindu and Buddhist features in their rituals.

Numerous Buddhist schools exist in Indonesia, namely Tibetan Vajrayana, Chinese Mahayana and Thai Theravada. There are also a number of Sangha organizations that includes monastic and the-so-called Councils for the laity.

The role of Buddhism missionary and education lies in the hands of the monks, nuns, panditas (rama and ramani), school teachers, and weekly kids club teachers.

Today, an alarming number of Buddhists convert to other religions due to marriage and mainly because of the lack of right understanding about the teaching of the Buddha and the lack of care from the Buddhist communities.

A Lost Tradition

The tradition to serve others in the Indonesian Buddhist community is relatively less common compared to other religious communities. It is probably due to the number of followers and the lack of people who care. Buddhist-owned orphanages, hospitals, cost-sharing clinics, schools, are still merely dreams.

A friend once complained that every time he goes to listen to sermons in the vihara, he is never greeted by the officials nor volunteers. If compared to other religions, the officials or even the speaker goes out to greet the followers and also to see them off. Whenever there are greeters, they do not smile, are impolite, and even ignore newcomers. There are also people who commented that vihara officials are not that proactive to get new followers that are actually willing to help. On the other hand, a very excited Buddhist that are actually passionate and have a wide smile said that it is very hard to get Buddhist to

commit to help. Those that want to help are few in numbers and there are no one to replace them. “It seems that,” he said, “there are only a few Buddhist that actually want to sacrifice for the Buddhist community or even for the good of the many.”

In Indonesia, Buddhists emphasize rituals and self-fulfillment rather than social actions and using services to cultivate noble virtues.

As a comparison, in Myanmar, where most of the population are Buddhists, the teaching of the six directions of social service that the Buddha taught to the youth Singalaka, still prevails as the common way of life. Parents that drop off and pick up their kids when their children are already in university are considered normal and does not “humiliate” their children. Not that there are no home for the age, but those places are almost empty because children thought that it would be ungrateful to put their parents there. Teachers that help their own students to get jobs are a common sight, some of them even waited for their students during job interviews. It is common that students adopt their elderly teachers and treat them as their own parents. The prostrating tradition does not only apply to religious figures, it is also part of the tradition there for workers to prostrate to their employers.

A teaching will disappear when not acted upon. An action will cease when it is not made to be part of a habit, either on a personal or a social level. Tradition will be forgotten when it is not understood and not practiced as a lifestyle.

There are a lot of teachings about serving others from the Buddha. One of the main teachings of the Buddha is about karma. Serving others, which is called *veyyavacca*, is one of the ten good karmas which bring virtues (*punnya-kiriyavatthu*).

“Helping or offering good service for others is called *veyyavacca*,” said Ashin Janakabhivansa, the abbot of the Mandalay Mahagandayone Monastery, the largest monk assembly in Myanmar. “Furthermore”, he said, “we have to offer help from the bottom of our heart so that others can feel light and free from worries, and the action of giving can be done well. We should also help the sick, the needy and also the elderly. We have to offer our help to people who

seems to struggle with what they are carrying and also help reduce our parent's weight off their shoulder. With that, all the deeds that have been done voluntarily for others, as long as it is not an evil deed, is included in *veyyavacca*.”³

Serve to be Perfect

The life and teaching of the Buddha breathes service in all of their aspects. According to the Buddhist Canon, the career of the service of Buddha Gotama started when he was born as Sumedha the ascetic, which was declared to be a future Buddha by Buddha Dipangkara. Since then, this bodhisattva kept on piling on noble virtues in many of his rebirth. In the Jatakas, he often helped and even sacrificed himself for the good of others. His main motivation was to alleviate the suffering of others and also to perfected his virtues. After an uncountable amount of time, at last, in his last life, he became the Sammasambuddha.

Different types of people have different motives to help and give according to their faith and also their spiritual growth. Some people can give out of annoyance or to humiliate the recipient, out of fear, to return a favor, to get something, because the deed is considered good, to help and share, to get a good reputation, to improve their spiritual aspect. In Buddhism, the proper motivation of giving is to help others without seeking anything in return as well as to reduce one's sense of self.

Be Perfect to Serve

Buddha's services did not end when he attained enlightenment under the pipal tree. The Buddha was never obliged to teach the way to happiness that he had found. However, because of his compassion for all beings, the Buddha decided to turn the wheel of Dharma in motion, to appoint disciples, propagate the Dharma, with no personal interest of any kind, simply for the good of the many, for the happiness of the many.

Thanks to the ministry of the Buddha that does not rest until the end of his days, there are countless beings those are able to taste true happiness. Kings,

the wealthy, the poor, the sick, the abandoned, the grieving, murderers, prostitutes, the outcasts, all could be freed from Sangsara.

On one occasion, when some of his disciples refuses to serve a sick fellow monk because they feel disgust to him, the Buddha himself cleans his sick disciple that is rotting and has an unbearable stench. He concluded by saying, "Whosoever serves the sick, serves me."⁴

From the historical timeline of the Bodddhisatva until the Buddha, it can be concluded that before he became perfect, he served to be perfect. After he became perfect, he served perfectly.

The Success of Missionary

The view of "as long as not harming others" is not enough to represent the Buddhist attitude, since the teachings of the Buddhas recommend three attitudes: non-harming, serving, and purifying mind.

If a religion intends to grow, it has to focus on service. Any institution or community that has a low capability in serving each other will be abandoned by its members and will not gain interest from others. Thus, "proactive service" will attract people, and in turn, those who were well served will be inspired to serve, and furthermore relay the tradition of serving each other.

In the free market, it is undeniable that people and companies who prioritizes customer service will win loyal customers and will gain good reputation.

Psychologically, each and every individual has a selfish question, which is, "What is it in for me?" This question, undeniably, is always there in the back of the mind of those who attends an event, a volunteer for a social event, even the donator for a charity event.

Those who can give the best answer for the question "What is in it for me?" will be the one who wins the heart of the customer or, in this case, followers. The keyword for the fulfillment of this question is: service. As a normal human being, one will prefer to go to viharas which have greeters that greets

with kind faces, wide smiles, and give sympathetic bows. One's selfish part always wants to feel being important rather than being neglected. It does not mean that one just want to be served, but it means that one would rather be served than not.

By putting on service first, volunteers will be more interested and, in turn, those who are served will be inspired to serve, and then pass on the culture and tradition to serve each other.

Changing the Image of Buddhism

In general, Buddhism had an image of being a passive, escapist religion, dealing only with self-salvation and lack of caring attitude.

Some Buddhist individuals and institutions had taken an initiative to launch a movement to accentuate the proactive, service-oriented and socially-sensitive Buddhism. The Humanistic Dharma movement is a significant example that will build Bodhicitta character: energetic, compassionate and wise for the good and happiness of the many.

A significant example of this is the humanistic movement that is inspired by Master Yin Shun⁵, the teacher of Master Cheng Yen, the founder of Tzu Chi, which is also very influential for modern teachers such as Master Sheng-yen, the founder of the Dharma Drum Mountain and also Master Hsing Yun, the founder of Fo Guang Shan. The goal of Humanistic Buddhism is to make people that embodies the Bodhisattva spirit: energetic, compassionate and wise. Humanistic Buddhism focuses on world problems and not to leave this world, care for the living rather than the dead, care for others more than caring for oneself, and seek for the universal salvation rather than self-salvation.

The aspiration of Master Yin Shun to serve Buddhism and all of the Earth's inhabitant is fulfilled by Master Cheng Yen and her Tzu Chi. Tzu Chi has inspired many materially rich individuals not only to give money passively to charity but also to feel the moment of truth by going to the front line to stretch out the helping hands.

Another moment that changes Buddhism is Socially Engaged Buddhism (SEB). Participants of SEB have a principle that says that true wisdom is found in compassionate action. The monk Thich Quang Ba said that SEB is not a new innovation because the teaching of interdependence is there from the start and has pushed Buddhism to be socially engaged and the Buddha and all of his disciples are always engaged in the act of service for others. Thich Qang Ba is glad that Thich Nhat Hanh has popularized the use of the term "Socially Engaged Buddhism" that brings Buddhism closer to its original character.⁶

The Dalai Lama XIV, a world renowned practitioner of SEB emphasizes the importance of service, "Each of us have responsibility for all humankind. It is time for us to think of other people as true brothers and sisters and to be concerned with their welfare, with lessening their suffering."⁷

Humanistic Dharma: Education, Action, Meditation

Ehipassiko Foundation is a non-profit organization based in Indonesia that is dedicated to the education, action and meditation of Humanistic Dharma.

As people have learned, Buddha taught with the methodology of theory (*pariyatti*), practice (*patipatti*) and insight (*pativedha*). Accordingly, Ehipassiko Foundation serves through its triad missions of Education, Action and Meditation.

Since its establishment in 2002, Ehipassiko's endeavours can be summarized as follows:

Education

- Book Publication
 - Buddhism books from all traditions: almost 300 titles and some become national best sellers in major book stores in general category.
 - Buddhism text books for students: our KG to G12 text books are used by almost all students and schools throughout the country.
 - Buddhist weekly school books.

- Tipitaka comics: most awaited collection for all ages.
- Kids picture books: media for young readers.
- Cartoon Animation Production.
- Music Production.
- T-shirt and Souvenirs Production.
- Conducting over a thousand Dharma talks, courses, trainings.
- Utilizing Social Media (website, Facebook, Twitter) to propagate our voices and programs to hundreds of thousands people.
- BuddhaZine.com Buddhist Daily Online: publishing national and global news, Dharma and life consultation with the experts, Dharma articles, photo and video news.

Action

- Scholarship: school fee for 2,500 students.
- Village Dharmaduta: employing 26 personnel to serve Buddhist communities in 228 remote villages by giving them free tutoring, allowance for birth, medication, coffin, and monastery renovation, Dharma talks and meditation guide.
- Ehipassiko Family Club: performing monthly inter-faith humanitarian works in 39 cities.
- Library Supply: setting up and supplying over 500 hundred libraries in monasteries and schools.
- Dharmaduta Support: free Buddhism books for monastic members, panditas and teachers.

Meditation

- Buddha Land Tour: organizing pilgrimage tour to countries with Buddhist histories such as India, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Thailand, Tibet, China and Bhutan.
- Meditation Retreat: conducting retreats to build awareness, compassion and wisdom.
- Meditation Centre: building a village centre to accommodate personal and group retreat.

Ehipassiko Foundation has become a significant contributor and an agent of change for the propagation of Buddhism in Indonesia by serving as a learning and practicing source for Buddhists and non-Buddhists alike.

Two Wings of Service

There are two wings of spirituality that will bring us towards enlightenment. Just like a bird that will not fly perfectly with only one wing, there are two wings of service: compassion and wisdom. Out of compassion, we help others. However, if that compassion is not paired with wisdom, we will be a kind-hearted foolish or that our lives will be thrown out of balance, or, at the very least, the compassion will be ineffective and unbalanced. In the end, that very person will suffer.

A social worker once asked Master Cheng Yen, “My friend gives everything he got to serve society but he does not have time to even serve his own family. I think there is something wrong with this friend of mine.” To this, Master Chen Yen replied, “That is not just wrong, it is definitely wrong!”

In one aspect we cannot be like the donut, sweet on the outside, but empty right in the middle. However, it is good for people to extend their service to beyond their own family. While doing our primary responsibility, gradually we can step towards helping other people beyond our own family, even helping other beings and also the environment. By doing this, we can become closer to understanding the true meaning of *metta*, non-discriminative love.

Any true spiritual maturity will naturally grow and becomes non-discriminative love within every one of us. Whatever our acts of serving, if they are done wholeheartedly and continuously they will be ingrained in habits, characters, spontaneity and will spawn a new tradition.

Bodhicitta Spirit

The topic of “Serving Others, a Lost Tradition” implies that service is actually a tradition that takes root at the very bottom of Buddhism but is not well cultivated. The tradition of service in the Buddhist tradition takes root in the

compassion, exemplary lives and the messages of the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas regarding bodhicitta, which means “enlightened mind,” and expanded its meaning to attaining enlightenment for the good of the many.

All Buddhist traditions, without exception, take the spirit of Bodhicitta highly, which shows that Buddhism is a teaching that takes in the tradition and the spirit of service and social awareness. The enlightenment that is an exclusively individual achievement can be achieved by the way of service and, ultimately, will be devoted to the good and the happiness of others.

Selfish motive is a phrase that is never taught by the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas. Shantideva, an Indian ascetic that lives in the 8th century said this clearly, “All happiness in this world comes from wanting others to be happy. All suffering in this world comes from wanting only oneself to be happy.”

In Bodhicaryāvatāra III:8,9,17,18,19, A Guide to Bodhisattva’s Way of Life, Shantideva wrote his vow:⁸

May I be the cure for those who are sick.

May I be the food for those who are hungry.

May I be a guard for those without one.

May I be a boat for those who wish to cross.

May I be an isle for those desiring landfall.

May I be a lamp for those who wish for light.

May I be a bed for those who need to rest.

May I be a servant for those who live in need.

Narada Thera⁹, a Sri Lankan monk that had contributed so much to the rise of Buddhism in Indonesia with his missionary action for 49 years (1934-1983), summarized the Buddhist purpose and way of life perfectly:

May I Serve to be Perfect.

May I be Perfect to Serve.

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