

Research

The Important Role of Gratitude in Human Society from Buddhist Perspective

Aye Myat Thu^{1*}, Phyu Phyu Thein¹, Ni Ni Win²

*Corresponding Author

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Abstract: Doing a favour means giving assistance bodily, verbally or materially when one is in need. Regarding gratitude, there are two kinds of persons, namely, a person who is in the habit of doing a favour and a person who is in the habit of requiting a favour as he knows the debt of gratitude he owes. Moreover, regarding requiting a favour, there is one who does not requite gratitude although he is aware of the other's gratitude. There can be a person who does not only know the favour done to him but also he requites that favour. There can be person who not only recognizes the other's favour but also he does not requite the debt of gratitude. In this paper, the persons who particularly know the gratitude of the other and the benefits acquired as a result of requital of the gratitude, the persons who are ungrateful and the advantages experienced as a result of ingratitude will be drawn from the Buddha's Teachings and presented.

Keywords: Buddha, assistance, favour, gratitude

Introduction

Gratitude means rendering assistance bodily, verbally or materially at the time of need. Among the persons who perform favours first of all, there are two kinds of person who are in the habit of performing favours. They are called *pubbakārī*. There are persons who are grateful for the favour and requite the favour in response. They are called *kataññuta katavedī*.

As there are various kinds of persons in this world, there are persons who perform favours in advance without expecting any benefit although there is no favour done to one. There are persons who requite favour in response to the favour done to one. There are persons who are ungrateful although there is favour done to them. The Buddha preached many discourses in connection with gratitude by giving many examples for the sentient beings to observe or discard.

^{1*} Lecturer, Ms, Department of Oriental Studies, Maubin University

¹ Lecturer, Dr, Department of Oriental Studies, University of Mandalay

² Lecturer, Ms, Department of Oriental Studies, Mawlamyine University

The factors that are to be observed and the factors to be discarded are quoted from these discourses and are briefly presented in the introduction of this paper.

The Meaning of Gratitude

The vocabulary “gratitude” is *upakāra* (*upa* + *√kara* + *ṇa*)¹ which conveys the meaning “gratitude, looking after.” In other words, it is giving protection, admonition or counseling bodily, verbally or materially when one is in need. Such persons are recognized as benefactors.² The Buddha preached in *Āsāduppapajaha Vagga*, *Tatiya Paṇṇāsaka*, *Aṅguttara Nikāya* that such persons who perform favours first are called *Pubbacārī* in Pāli language and that he is one of the two persons who are hard to find in this world³.

According to tradition there are ten kinds of benefactor who should not be wronged in this world. They are:-

- (1) the Buddha,
- (2) the Lesser Buddha,
- (3) Arahāt who is *saṅghā*-waned,
- (4) The foremost disciples of the Buddha,
- (5) One’s mother,
- (6) One’s father,
- (7) An honourable person,
- (8) One’s mentor,
- (9) Preacher of the Buddhist faith and⁴
- (10) one’s benefactor.

Knowing the Other’s Gratitude

Knowing the other’s gratitude is a person who requites the other’s gratitude when one is in need of favour. The Buddha preached in *Āsāduppapajaha Vagga* in *Tatiya Paṇṇāsaka*, *Aṅguttara Nikāya* that such a person is included as a person in the two kinds of person who are difficult to find⁵.

¹ Pāmyandhan, 219.

² Kokyint, 487.

³ A.I, 86.

⁴ Thayokepya, 139.

⁵ A.I, 86.

Regarding gratitude the Buddha preached to the disciple monks at *Jetavana* Monastery in *Sāvatthi* City that the person who knows the other's gratitude, the person who requites the other's gratitude are destined to celestial heavens in the life after death¹. The Buddha preached in *Dutiya Sīṅgāla Sutta*² that although some of the Sakyan princes admitted that they were Buddha's sons in this *Sāsanā*, they did not pay the debt of gratitude of the Buddha in return. Therefore the Buddha preached that knowing the debt of gratitude of the other, they must practise so that the little favour that they performed should not get lost.

In continuation the Buddha preached in *Samacitta Vagga*³ in *Anguttara Nikāya* that the persons who do not know other's gratitude or the ingrate is the basis of the wicked persons and the person who knows the debt of other's gratitude and who requites the gratitude is the basis of the virtuous persons. Regarding the requital of the parents' gratitude the Buddha preached that it does not amount to requital of the parents' gratitude by performing major and minor duties by placing the two parents one on each shoulder. It is requital of the parents' gratitude by helping them to become generous if they are not replete with generosity. It is requital of gratitude to help one's parents to be moral if they are immoral. It is requital of the parents' gratitude to help them to become replete with alms-giving if they are stingy. It is requital of gratitude to help the parents to become wise if they are ignorant. Such treatments are requital of the parents' gratitude.

Moreover the Buddha also preached that as the parents perform many grateful works such as protecting their children, feeding nutritious foods, etc. those who look after their parents at their homes, they should treat their parents just like dwelling with Brahmas⁴, just like dwelling with one's foremost mentor, just like dwelling with the Guardian Spirits of the House. Such treatments are not only praised by the wise, they are also destined to the celestial heavens in the life after death⁵.

Ten Benefits Enjoyed by Those Who Pay Reverence to the Benefactors

The persons who pay reverence to the ten kinds of great benefactors are obtainable of ten benefits. They are:-

- (1) No scarcity of food in visiting other's village;

¹ A.I,548.

² S.I,461

³ A.II, 63

⁴ A.III, 130

⁵ A.I. 181

- (2) Receiving reverence at places of arrival,
- (3) Not molested by five kinds of enemies;
- (4) Plenty of friends on catching sight,
- (5) Self-confidence among crowd,
- (6) Good reputation,
- (7) No scarcity of retinue,
- (8) Having many domestic animals and no failure of crops;
- (9) Obtaining refuge when fallen off cliff or hillside;
- (10) Greatness of foundation together with sons and daughters¹.

Persons Who Know Gratitude

The Buddha preached to the monks in *Akataññutā Sutta* in *Parisā vagga, Aṅguttara Nikāya*² that the one who knows the other's gratitude is destined to the celestial heaven. Moreover many beings are included in saying in *Jātakas* that there were many beings who particularly know the others' gratitude and who requite the other's gratitude.

In *Kedāra Jātaka*³, the King of Parrots, the Bodhisatta, looked after his parents in the grove of silk-cotton trees near the thale paddy field owned by a Brahmin called *Kesīyagota*. The Parrot King and his follower birds used to go to the *thale* paddy field with ripe paddy ears. On returning to the grove of silk-cotton trees the Parrot King used to take the ears of paddy for his parent parrots. The Brahmin caused the field-labourer to catch the Parrot King with a noose. When the Parrot King was caught, the Brahmin asked the particulars. The Parrot King explained that he was selling on credit by feeding the young children and that he was burying pot of a pot gold by looking after the parents. Thereupon, the Brahmin set the Parrot King free from the noose and then the Brahmin invited the Parrot King to partake of the *thale* paddy from his paddy field in this Jataka tale, As the Parrot King knew the gratitude of the other, Parrot King escaped death. Furthermore the Parrot King was donated the eight units of land measure of paddy field by the Brahmin. Although Parrot King was an animal, it knew the other's gratitude.

Similarly also in the tales of *Mātuposaka Jātaka*⁴, *Mahāassaroha Jātaka*¹, *Tiriṭivaccha Jātaka*², *Guṇa Jātaka*³ and *Taṇhā Jātaka*⁴, there were many persons who requited gratitude as

¹ Thukha, 193

² A. I, 548

³ J.A. I, 276-81

⁴ J.A. 4., 91-6

they were grateful to the benefactors. Those who know other's gratitude are praised by the virtuous persons. They are also found to enjoy benefit for knowing other's gratitude. Also in the tale of *Cūlaratha Vimāna Vatthu* in *Khuddaka Nikāya*⁵, Venerable *Mahākaccāyana* admonished Prince *Sujāta*, the son of King *Assaka* with respect to gratitude while going on a royal hunt that the persons who know the other's gratitude can accrue benefits that are worthy of praising in the present existence.

Being an Ingrate One Charges the Benefactor

Lack of rendering assistance to the benefactor when he is in need of assistance is ingratitude. The one who plots to get a benefactor into trouble without helping him when he is in need is ingratitude⁶. The person who does not know gratitude and the person who falsely charges a benefactor will suffer losses and failures in the present existence and he will also experience sufferings in numerous existences in the future. One who does not know other's gratitude tends to commit misdeeds easily and is destined to great suffering in the four *Apāyas* (the Nether Worlds) in the life after death⁷.

The Buddha preached the monks in *Akataññuta Sutta*⁸ in *Aṅguttara Nikāya* that the one who does not know the gratitude done by the other and who does not do evidently is a fool who will be born in hell in the life after death. During the life time of the Buddha, *Devadatta* and Prince *Ajātasattu* were notorious among the persons who were destined to Avīci (the Lowest Hell). *Devadatta* started to bear grudge against the Buddha from the life of *Seriva*⁹, a merchant of coloured glass balls. As *Devadatta* attempted to assassinate the Buddha repeatedly, he was destined to Avīci Hell in the life after death although he was endowed with the eight *Samāpatti* (Attainments of Mental Absorption) and five *Abhiññā* (Supernormal Knowledges)¹⁰. Moreover many persons who are ingrateful and who falsely charge the benefactor can be evidently seen in *Akataññuta Jātaka*¹¹, *Sakuṇa Jātaka*¹, *Asampadāna Jātaka*², and *Takkapaṇita Jātaka*³.

¹ J.A.III, 8-12

² J.A.II, 284

³ *Ibid*, 21-6

⁴ J.A.I, 209-12

⁵ Vv.88

⁶ Kōkyint, 487

⁷ Alinpya, 324

⁸ A.I, 548

⁹ J.A.I, 128

¹⁰ A.III, 10-3

¹¹ J.A.I, 400-2

The account of a wicked and ungrateful woman called *Duṭṭhakumārī* is found in *Takkapaṇita Jātaka*. *Duṭṭhakumārī* was a daughter of a wealthy man in *Bāranaśī* city. She was wont to treat the servants harshly and rudely. On one day, the rain fell heavily when they were sporting in the Ganges River. The servants ran away leaving the wealthy man's daughter in the river. She was drifted downstream to a place near the hermitage of a hermit, the *Bodhisatta*. The hermit swam to the middle of the river and salvaged the wealthy man's daughter. After three days, although the hermit told the woman to continue her journey, the wealthy man's daughter employed wile to make the Bodhisatta to yield to her will. The Bodhisatta hermit took the woman from the hermitage to a village and he earned his living by selling vinegar. One day a gang of bad characters entered and looted the village. In exiting from the village, the leader of the bad men took the hermit's wife as his wife. As the woman could live comfortably with the gang leader without wishing for, she was worried that her ex-husband, the hermit, would come and took her. Therefore the woman again employed artifice to get her former husband killed by the gang leader. The gang leader came to know the true facts of life on hearing grumbling of the wise hermit when the gang leader beat him. Therefore the gang leader did not kill the hermit. Instead he killed the ungrateful woman. In this *Jātaka* the wicked and ungrateful wife wronged her benefactor. As a consequence of wronging a benefactor, she was killed.

Similarly in the tale of ungrateful lion in *Sakuṇa Jātaka*, it is shown that one should not expect anything from an ingrate. The accounts of ungrateful friend are found in *Asampāda Jātaka* and *Akataññuta Jātaka*. The account of ungrateful *Sākha Senapati* (the Military Commander) is found in *Nigrodhā Jātaka*.

The Ten Disadvantages of the Persons Who Wrong Their Benefactors

The persons who wronged their benefactors experience the following ten disadvantages. They are:

- (1) Experiencing great pain,
- (2) Reducing prosperity,
- (3) Burning of dwelling,
- (4) Maiming and expiry of life,
- (5) Being afflicted with leprosy,

¹ J.A.III, 24-5

² J.A.I,491

³ *Ibid*, 313-7

- (6) Insanity,
- (7) Incurring royal punishment,
- (8) Being accused by others,
- (9) Separation from relatives, and
- (10) loss of gold, silver, buffaloes, cattle. etc.

Consideration

The Buddha preached discourses to the living beings to the celestial beings, human beings, Brahmas for forty-five monsoon retreats. The Buddha preached that *Kataññuta katavedī* called requiting the other's gratitude is a blessing that enables to acquire supramundane benefit. Moreover the person who requites the other's gratitude is praised by the virtuous persons and he was reborn in celestial abode in the life after death. *Pubbakārī* (the person who first performs favour) and *kataññuta katavedī* (the persons who know the other's gratitude) are the persons who are difficult to find in this world.

Regarding paying the debt of parents' gratitude, the Buddha preached that supporting parents with material things is not the only way to repay the debt of gratitude of the parents. The debt of gratitude can also be repaid by helping them to be replete with *saddhā* (conviction), *sīla* (morality), *suta* (general knowledge) and *cāga* (charity). In this world knowing other's gratitude is the basis of the virtuous persons, the Buddha preached in *Vimāna Vatthu* that one will enjoy happiness not only in the present life but also in the celestial life after death.

Moreover as not knowing the other's gratitude is the basis of the wicked persons, the Buddha preached in *Peta Vatthu*¹ that one will be forsaken by friends in the present existence, one will also lose people's respect and esteem. Furthermore, one will experience much hardship and difficulty.

The Buddha not only exhorted the sentient beings to be aware of other's gratitude but also to requite the gratitude in many discourses. The Buddha also preached *Abhidhamm* to *Santussita Deva* that he repaid the debt of gratitude to Mother *Santussita Deva* in payment of the debt of gratitude. The Buddha also preached that he could accomplish his father King *Suddhodana* established in *Arahattaphala* at the time of passing away. Therefore one should dwell in accord with the Buddha's auspicious *dhammas* while attempting to know the other's gratitude and to perform favours to others.

¹ Pv,272

Abbreviations

Pāli Texts

| | |
|-------|---|
| A.I | Aṅguttara Nikāya Pāli (Ekaka, Duka, Tika, Catukanipāta) |
| A.II | Aṅguttara Nikāya Pāli (Pañcaka, Chakka, Sattakanipāta) |
| A.III | Aṅguttara Nikāya Aṭṭhaka Pāli (Navaka Dasaka Nipāta Pāli) |
| Pv | Petavatthu Pāli Canon |
| S.1 | Saghāthā Vagga and Nidānavagga Samyutta Pāli Canon, |
| Vv. | Vimānavatthu Pāli Canon |

Aṭṭhakathā

| | |
|----------|---------------------------------|
| J.A, I | Jātakatṭhakathā (Pathamobhāgo) |
| J.A, II | Jātakatṭhakathā (Dutiyobhāgo) |
| J.A, III | Jātakatṭhakathā (Tatiyobhāgo) |
| J.A, IV | Jātakatṭhakathā (Catutthobhāgo) |

General Texts

| | |
|--------------|-------------------------------|
| Alinpya | Buddhist Alinpya Treatise, |
| Kokyint | Kokyint Maṅgalā, |
| Pā Myan Dhan | Pāli-Myanmar Abhidhan |
| Tharuppya | Thutesana Thayokepya Abhidhan |
| Thukha | Thukha Hmatsu |

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Aye Myat Thu

Lecturer from Department of Oriental Studies, Maubin University, Union of Myanmar

She passed matriculation from BEHS (2), Nyaung Done, Pathein, Myanmar. She completed her BA (Hons:) and MA (Oriental Studies) from University of Yangon on 2002 and 2004 respectively. Now she is a PhD candidate at University of Mandalay. Her research preference areas are Pāli Language & Literature, Buddhist Philosophy, Buddhist Art and Architecture, Buddhist Culture and History of Buddhism etc.



Dr. Phyu Phyu Thein

Lecturer from Department of Oriental Studies, University of Mandalay, Union of Myanmar

She passed matriculation from BEHS (16), Mandalay, Myanmar. She completed her BA (Hons:) and MA (Oriental Studies) from University of Mandalay on 2003 and 2005 respectively. She got PhD Degree from (MU) on 2014. Her research preference areas are Pāli Language & Literature, Buddhist Philosophy, Buddhist Art and Architecture, Buddhist Culture and History of Buddhism etc.



Ms. Ni Ni Win

Lecturer from Department of Oriental Studies, Mawlamyaing University, Union of Myanmar.

She passed matriculation from B.E.H.S (1) Myeik, Myanmar. She completed her BA (Hons:) and MA (Oriental Studies) from Yangon University on 2002 and 2004 respectively.



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