

BUDDHIST INFLUENCE ON THE JOINT FAMILY IN THE THERAVADA BUDDHIST COUNTRIES

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Prior to the studying of the status of the joint family in the Theravada Buddhist countries in South and Southeast Asia, we should know something about Buddhism. Even though Buddhism was taught first in India which was the land of Brahmanism, there were so many different ways of contrasting between Buddhism and Brahmanism. One of the essential differences was that Brahmanism taught the people to believe in Brahma, the Supreme God, or the Creator of everything, and to pray to him, since our lives depend on the line of destiny marked by him. Buddhism, on the contrary, taught the people to believe in their own actions or Kamma, for ourselves we are responsible for our own actions. The Buddha is not the God, he is only one who has enlightened and points the way for happiness. The other points of contrast are the caste system and the status of the women in the societies. In Brahmanism, the people were divided into four castes, i.e. Brahmanas, Kshatriyas, Vaisyas, and Sudras, while in Buddhism there are no castes at all. Everyone is equal. They are only different by Kamma, or action. Anyone has a chance to elevate himself in accordance with his actions and wishes.

It was the Buddha who first abolished the slavery and vehemently protested against the degrading caste-system of Brahmanism which has firmly rooted in India. In Buddhism, it is not by mere birth, one becomes either an outcaste or a Brahmin, but by one's action or Kamma. Caste, colour or race does not preclude one from becoming a Buddhist or entering the Order. So the gate of Buddhism was and is opened wide to all, irrespective of race, caste, colour, rank, or nationality; just as the water from several rivers

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goes to the same ocean, it becomes the only one unique, so the people from different classes or castes and nations come to Buddhism, they are all Buddhist equally.

Buddhism has an idea of establishing the brotherhood of all living beings. Its aim is for the peaceful co-existence. It is unique, mainly owing to its rationality, practicability, efficacy, and universality.

Let us consider the status of the women in Indian societies prior to the time of the Buddha. According to the "Law of Manu", the women were declared to have no property; the wealth which they earned was acquired for the men to whom they belonged. They had no right in the societies. They were not different from the slaves and were only the property of men. But in the time of the Buddha, the women played a considerable part in the entourage of the Buddha. The Buddha admitted that they were capable of attaining the Arahatsip which is the goal of Buddhism as well as men, and admitted them to the Order. This is the first time in the oriental, if not the world, history in which the women had equal right to men. By law, both men and women are equal, however, in fact, the men seems to be more equal, since only men were the Buddha.

Prior to the understanding of the Hinayana or Theravada Buddhist societies, it should be known that Brahmanism or Hinduism had spreaded to the South-east Asia before the coming of Buddhism. Until around the 11th to the 13th centuries, Theravada Buddhism could dominate in the countries of South-east Asia, particularly Burma, Thailand, Laos, and Cambodia. It is Buddhism that teaches the peoples the freedom of thinking, the equality and the way of peaceful co-existence, hence in the Buddhist societies men and women are equal before the law. Daughters inherit equally with sons, and do the younger sons inherit equally with the eldest sons.

It is a tradition in the Theravada Buddhist countries that every man of twenty years of age or more is expected to be a monk for a while, particularly three months in the rainy season. However, if anyone wants to be ordained prior to the age of twenty, he may be ordained as a novice.

During his monkhood or novicehood, he is required to study the monks' disciplines, the general "dhamma", and the "dhamma" for the secular life. In the Order,

everyone is equal according to the discipline, regardless of race, caste, or nationality. They respect to each other regarding to age of monkhood and the knowledge of Dhamma. If the monastic disciplines and vows of chastity and temperance should prove too rigorous, a monk could at any time return to secular life. But so long as anyone wears the yellow robes, he is the object of superstitious veneration. The parents highly respect their son who was monk as well as the master to his servant who becomes a monk. Even though the king himself recognizes today's monk as his superior. At the present time, only the men have opportunity to be ordained, and only this case which makes men seem more equal than women.

The goal of Buddhism is "Nirvana", that is the state of absolute distinction of suffering. In fact, everyone cannot attain it in the same time. Thus, the Buddha taught the doctrine of love and goodwill between men and men concerning the domestic and social ethics with more comprehensive detail than elsewhere. It concerns to the relations of the layman on and to his surroundings. In Buddhism, nothing in the duties of housemen is left unmentioned. According to the Sigalovada Sutta of the Digha-Nikaya of Suttanta Pitaka, the Buddha taught a young man how to practise himself to his surroundings: parents, wife, friends, master, teacher, and monks, as follows:

1) The relationship between parents and child:

In five ways a child should minister to his parents:

- (1) once supported by them he should be their support,
- (2) he should perform duties incumbent on them,
- (3) he should keep up the lineage,
- (4) and tradition of his family, and
- (5) he should make himself worthy of his heritage.

In return, the parents should minister to their child in five ways:

- (1) by restraining him from vice,
- (2) by exhorting him to virtue,
- (3) by training him to a profession,
- (4) by contracting a suitable marriage for him, and

(5) in due time handing over his inheritance.

2) The relationship between pupils and teachers:

In five ways the pupils should minister to their teachers:

- (1) by rising from their seat in salutation,
- (2) by waiting upon them,
- (3) by eagerness to learn,
- (4) by personal service, and
- (5) by attention when receiving their teachings.

And in five ways do teachers to their pupils:

- (1) by training them in that wherein they (teachers) have been well trained,
- (2) by making them fast that which is well held,
- (3) by instructing them thoroughly in the lore of every art,
- (4) by speaking well of them among their friends and companions, and
- (5) by providing for their safety in every quarter.

3) The relationship between husband and wife:

In five ways should a wife be ministered by her husband:

- (1) by respect,
- (2) by courtesy,
- (3) by faithfulness,
- (4) by handing over authority to her, and
- (5) by providing her with adornment.

In return, the wife should minister to her husband in five ways:

- (1) by well performing her duty,
- (2) by hospitality to the kin of both,
- (3) by faithfulness,
- (4) by watching over the goods her husband brings, and
- (5) by skill and industry in discharging all her business.

4) The relationship between friends:

In five ways should one minister to his friends and familiars:

- (1) by generosity,
- (2) by courtesy,
- (3) by benevolence,
- (4) by treating them as he treats himself, and
- (5) being as good as his word.

In return, his friends should minister him in five ways:

- (1) by protecting him when he is off his guard,
- (2) and on such occasions guard his property,
- (3) by becoming his refuge in danger,
- (4) by not forsaking him in his troubles, and
- (5) by showing consideration for his family.

5) The relationship between masters and servants, employers and employees: In five ways the masters or employers should minister to their servants or employees:

- (1) by assigning them work according to their strength,
- (2) by supplying them with food and wages,
- (3) by tending them in sickness,
- (4) by sharing with them unusual delicacies, and
- (5) by granting leave at times.

And the servants or employees, in return, should provide their ministers or employers in five ways:

- (1) by rising before him,
- (2) by lying down to rest after him,
- (3) by being content with what is given to them,
- (4) by doing their work well, and
- (5) by carrying about their praise and good fame.

6) The relationship between laypeople and monks:

In five ways should the lay-people should minister to the monks or recluses:

- (1) by affecting in act,
- (2) in speech,

(3) in mind,

(4) by keeping open house to them, and

(5) by supplying their temporal needs

And the monks or recluses, in return, should minister the lay-people in six ways:

(1) by restraining him from evil,

(2) by exhorting him to good,

(3) by loving him with kindly thoughts,

(4) by teaching him what he had not heard,

(5) by correcting and purifying what he had heard, and

(6) by revealing to him the way to heaven and happiness.

These are the Buddha's teachings concerning how to adjust ourselves to the surroundings which are the basic teachings for the secular life. One who is the ex-monk or ex-novice has already studied these "dhammas" before leaving monkhood or novice-hood. They usually transfer these "dhammas" as well as the others to their wives, children, and neighbours. In this way, they always live a good life and in peace. The peaceful co-existence will automatically happen among them. These are only a part of the living laws or customary laws which have been and being practised throughout all the Theravada Buddhist countries, particularly in the villages outside the cities.

In Thailand under the absolute monarchy, that is before 2475 B.C./ 1932, the center of administration was in the capital or "Muang Luang". The king had full power in the administration. And there were at least four "muang" or important cities at the cardinal points which were *each* ruled by a son of the king, and the sons in turn seemed often to have succeeded him. These princes governed their provinces as almost independent kingdoms, which were known as "Muang luk luang", in contradiction to the "muang luang" or capital province ruled directly by the king. No doubt the princes held their provinces feudally from the king and governed them on the same paternal lines as did the king in his capital province, the sons being sworn to co-operate with their father for mutual defence and for conquest.

The ultimate feudal unit within the "muang" was the "khrua" or family, governed by the father of the family. A number of these units were known as "luk ban" the children of the village, the vassals of the "pho ban" or the father of the village, a number of whom as "luk muang" owed allegiance to the "pho muang" who ruled over the "muang luk luang" and was a son of the king.

Thailand was divided into several "muang" or provinces, each of which was divided into districts or "amphoe". Each district official had within his "amphoe" a number of communes, known as "tambon" each of which was in charge of an official called a "kamnan". He in turn was responsible for several "ban" or villages, each under a "phu yai ban", or village headman. The latter were chosen by the villagers, and recognized by the governor of the province. The "ban" or village was the territorial administrative unit in later times, just as it was in earlier feudal days; but, whereas it was formerly governed in a patriarchal manner by a man who owed his administrative appointment to the fact that he was the natural head of a number of families, in the latter period he is an official appointed by the government. The system of village administration depended mostly on the living laws or customary laws. The people drew idea of law from the Buddhist Dhamma, the Moral Law. To the Buddhist, this is not a divine law, a law of God, or a commandment; it is just only the living law, the customary law, or the rules of conduct. The social relations in the villages was mostly adopted and adapted from the Sigalovada Sutta and other dhammas as above mentioned.

Moreover, in Burma, as well as in Thailand, Laos, and Cambodia, the monasteries provided a training in democracy, as boys of all classes worked and played together, sharing alike in menial duties of the monasteries. And when they became novices or monks, they once again received the idea of democracy, since they shared together equally their works, food, and lodgings. They have no private properties more than necessary according to the "Vinaya" or monk's disciplines. The properties belong to the "Sangha" or monks' community. Only the "Sangha" has the right to use them. No one can use it personally without the permission of the "Sangha". They are jointly responsible on the "Sangha's" properties. Even the chief abbot of the monastery has no right to do

anything without the "Sangha's sanction. This is a kind of democracy of its own which has been practising since the time of the Buddha. This kind of practice has influence upon the novices and monks more or less and still follows them after leaving the monkhood. And it has been being adapted to practise throughout the countries, particularly in the villages. Hence, it now becomes the living law of the peoples, and the foundation of the western democracy.

In Thailand, as well as in the Theravada Buddhist countries in South and South-east Asia, most of the population are Buddhists, in Thailand around 94.5 per cent, in Burma more than 80, in Laos and Cambodia more than 90. In these countries, if you go, it is not necessary for you to fear that you will starve to death even though you have no money. The people will welcome you regardless of race, nationality, or religion. They will give you food and lodging. Sometimes the money is useless, since no one will sell you the food or something else, but they will willingly give you free. Even though the Christian missionaries can go and stay in the Buddhist monasteries. The Buddhist monks will welcome them kindly with food to eat and room to sleep. Unfortunately, some of them are not good enough. They try to destroy the relations of the people, the customary laws of the villages, and the relations between the relatives. Nevertheless, the Buddhist people, particularly the Buddhist monks, are very tolerant. They never denounce any religion and are pity to ones who try to destroy their religion, since that is the teaching of the Buddha. It is the Buddhist Law of "Anatta" which makes them generous, unselfish. it teaches us to have no concept of God, "Atta", Soul or Brahma. And it is because we have no concept of "Atta" or "Self", we have no concept of "this am I, this is mine". This is the ethical foundation of generosity or unselfishness. If one has no attachment in "Atta" or "Self", the selfishness will not happen. The generosity follows. The world will be full of the generous ones, not the selfish. Furthermore, The Buddhist "Pancha-Sila", not Nehru's or Sukarno's, is the moral foundation of the Buddhist people as a whole. It composes of abstaining (1) from killing, (2) from stealing, (3) from adultery, (4) from lying, and (5) from liquor and addictive things that cause intoxication and heedlessness. This is the other kind of the living laws

generally practised by the Buddhist peoples. By these living laws, we live in peace. Even though in the material point of view we are not civilized, but in the spiritual point of view, we think, we are more civilized than many of the peoples in the civilized countries, since we have no conflict of race discrimination, religion or something like that as happened in the civilized countries.

From these points, we can see that Buddhism has played the great roles throughout the Buddhist countries. It gives them the living laws, the customary laws, the rules of conduct. In so far as Buddhism is concerned, the standard of the morality of the peoples in these countries will not decline. This is my point of view as regards the living laws deeply influenced on the joint families in the Theravada Buddhist countries, particularly in South-east Asia.

