

# **Preserving Family Cohesiveness In Compliance With Buddhist Teachings**

*Saw Yee Mon  
Myanmar*

## **Introduction**

Human quest for ultimate peace and harmony still remains elusive in the 21<sup>st</sup> century world. The failure to this quest largely depends on the fact that human beings, instead of trying to maintain the already existed human qualities and human attributes, are vastly chasing after material improvements. As a consequence, the genuine qualities of life such as peace, harmony and cohesiveness in families are fading with time. It is found out that modernization is indeed a powerful force behind the thread which obscures the invaluable traditions and customs that create peace and harmony in human society. Less people aware of this and are deceived by the temptations of the material world.

This paper tries to concentrate on how to prevent the threats, especially concerned with the cohesiveness in families which is one of the most prominent features of most Buddhist countries of the East. Currently, we witness that Asian families' attitude has changed. Many aged people live all by themselves, away from their children, and some unfortunate ones are abandoned and some less fortunate ones are sent to institutions where they can receive care they need. On the other hand, people leave home at early age like in their late teens to be independent and to explore the world without taking aware of the value and the need to be as close as possible with their parents. Without a doubt, East-Asian and South East Asian countries like Japan, Korea, Singapore, Taiwan, Vietnam, Thailand and Myanmar are experiencing this inevitably. It would be unavailing to blame the globalization and influence of western cultures but it would be worthwhile to re-explore life's genuine values, preserve them and live with them. Hence those values are clearly defined in the teachings of Buddha.

## **Myanmar and the Buddhist Teachings**

Myanmar is a country of approximately sixty million people with a great array of ethnically and linguistically diverse people. It is also the largest country in main land South-East Asia. There are more than a dozen linguistically distinct ethnic groups in Myanmar with as many as a hundred different dialects. Buddhism is its major religion and its culture, norms and traditions are dominated by Buddhist teachings. Buddhism also has influence on the lifestyle of Myanmar people and again their mindset is endowed with the teachings of Buddha. Hence, in comparing with other Asian countries, Myanmar still maintains a high degree of cohesiveness in individual families as well as in the community. It cannot be denied that there are cases where elderly people and young children are abandoned in Myanmar but they are rare and exceptional and can be only seen in thickly populated areas with a large diversity. Generally, Myanmar families are cohesive and so do the individual communities across the country.

## **Family Cohesiveness in Myanmar**

Both in large and small families, care is reciprocal for parents and children. Parents take care of their children without a specified limit. This can be generally put into stages. Parents take care of their offspring in childhood where proper care is necessary, in teenage years where proper guidance is necessary, during their youth where love and support is necessary, during their mid life where attention and appreciation is necessary and even in the matured ages when sharing and caring is necessary. This doesn't mean to create an obstacle for children to get matured and being independent, rather it shows how the parents fully take their responsibility as parents and to set example for their next generations.

Again for the offspring, they are ready and willing to look after their parents in return not only to pay back the gratitude they owe but also to make sure that they accomplish their responsibility as offspring. This also reflects in teacher-pupil relationship. Pupils take care of the welfare of their teachers as much as they can in many aspects. In other words, there has always been social security for needy teachers usually provided by their pupils. Myanmar society does not allow elderly people and teachers to die of poverty in abandonment. Myanmar government subsidizes for such welfare issues but the community itself and the individuals usually volunteer to make contributions as well.

In fact, post-independence Myanmar experienced unusual social campaign that encouraged the whole nation to look after their own parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles, grandaunts and grand uncles and also the elderly people who did not have family or relatives to support them. By so doing, these anti-old aged homes campaigns under the leadership of the late Premier U Nu intended to promote social duties of humans as taught in the Buddha Dhamma. However, there was an establishment of government funded old aged home called 'Rose Hill Aged Home' for aged people from all over the country, who had lost their families and were left as celibacies. Of course, there were several aged homes and asylums operated by non-Buddhist missionary groups but they were not financially supported by the Myanmar government at that time particularly in order to maintain the customary practices of culture and religious teachings. The aforesaid campaign had reached success to some extent.

Regarding the social relationships in Myanmar, the cohesiveness is prominently stronger. People still maintain and practice the traditional values. The question here is how do Myanmar people maintain the high degree cohesiveness in community and families? Obviously it is due to their cultural concepts which are rooted in Buddhist teachings. These concepts have been taught and handed down from generation to generation throughout the centuries. The most eminent example would be the verses composed by Singajā Sayardaw, a highly respected Buddhist monk and famous scholar of 18<sup>th</sup> century Kon Baung era. He was also influential in the Kon Baung court. He wrote many volumes on Buddhism in Myanmar language. Among his famous works were those of the short and concise poem-like rhyming verses of social duties extracted from Sanghāla Sutta.

## **Background of Singala Sutta**

Social duties for all human beings are defined and described in Singāla Sutta. This particular sutta was expounded by the Buddha while he was residing at the monastery in Bamboo Grove near Rājagaha about two thousand-six hundred years ago. The Buddha expounded the sutta to a young man called Singālaka who rose early

in the morning, having gone out from Rājagaha, and worshiped the various directions such as the East, the South, the North, the West, the Nadir and the Zenith. The Buddha, seeing Singālaka worshipping the various directions with his palms together, asked the young man the purpose of such behavior. Then the young man answered with great respect to the Buddha that he was worshipping the various directions simply because his father had taught him to do so. Therefore, in order to obey his father he said he worshiped the directions early in the morning everyday.

Having had an answer from Singālaka, the Buddha expounded that according to Ariyan teachings (noble teachings) the worshiping of merely six directions was not said to be rational. In other words, the six directions were not to be worshiped in this manner. A wise and noble disciple should regard the six directions as follows: parents should be looked upon as East, teachers as South, wife and children as West, friends and associates as North, servants and employees as Nadir and samañas and brahmañas as Zenith. Instead of worshipping towards just the directions, there are duties to be observed by individuals in accordance with their social status. The Buddha expounded these duties in a very comprehensive context in Singāla Sutta.

### **Adaptation of Singāla Sutta in Myanmar**

There are altogether (11) different sets of Social Duties for all human beings of different social status. Singajā Sayardaw translated these duties into Myanmar language in rhyming verses, such as Duties for Parents; Duties for Sons and Daughters, Duties for Teachers; Duties for Pupils; Duties for Husband; Duties for Wife; Duties for Friend; Duties for Leaders; Duties for Employee; Duties for Laymen towards Samañas; and Duties for Bhikkhu towards Disciples. Because of their rhyming effect, these verses are easy to remember. In olden days, people learned these verses by heart and passed on to the younger generations by teaching the verses informally. During the time of Singajā Sayardaw, there were no public schools in Myanmar. Education was provided by means of monastic schools. The first formal school was established with the patronage of King MinDon, but it was meant only for the royals. When Myanmar fell under the British, public schools were opened under British rule. Then there came the national schools which were independent of the British system and run by Myanmar patriotic nationals. These schools offered curriculum containing morals and ethics in which the above mentioned Social Duties were included. This marks the beginning of the teaching of Social Duties in formal schools. After Myanmar regained the independence, the new education system under the Myanmar government included these Social Duties in the primary textbooks of Myanmar literature. These contained the Social Duties for pupils, the Social Duties for teachers, the Social Duties for Sons and Daughters and the Social Duties for Parents. From then on, these verses have been taught in primary level of every school all over the country. In primary, it started with the Duties for Pupils which are prescribed in the Myanmar literature text book for the first graders. Duties for Pupils are as follows.

3

### **Duties for Pupils**

- Rise from the seat when the teacher comes;
- Attend and wait upon the teacher;
- Obey his words;
- Offer personal service;
- Learn, think and recite what has been taught.

As mentioned above, the duties for pupils are very simple, easy to understand and easy to practice. When rising from the seat, it is not only for a single student to stand up from his seat but for the whole class to rise together uniformly. This is the beginning of establishing team spirit among the children. Even though these duties for pupils are precise and straight forward, when they are taught in the class rooms, teachers usually elaborate them and teach them in comprehensive explanations. The word choice of the translator Singajā Sayardaw is exceptionally plausible. When he translated the original Pāli verses to Myanmar, the words he used carry wide spectrum of meanings. Thus when the duties are taught in the classroom or else where they can be explained and understood in many ways. In Myanmar translated verses, the meaning of the first duty of pupils conveys not only to rise from the seat when the teacher comes but also to be alert and be ready to learn lessons, and of course to avoid laziness. Here, in these verses, the duty to offer personal service is perceived with extended meanings. In olden days, pupils offered personal service by giving helping hand in doing house chores at teacher's place including the habit of providing foods occasionally. Currently, in some rural areas and in the country side, pupils help their teachers in collecting water, chopping firewood, etc. Bringing food for teacher is very common in both rural and urban.

For Myanmar pupils this is not the complete accomplishment of their duties. They go further beyond this. Teachers are given the same status as parents. Therefore, when the teachers get old and need care and help, pupils look after them like their own parents. The tradition of holding Ācariya Pujā is very common in Myanmar. At these occasions, both former pupils and current pupils pay respect to their teachers. They also offer cash, food and clothing, medicine and other essential items for their teachers. Apart from once a year Ācariya Pujā, pupils pool money and also raise funds to provide support on regular basis for the needy teachers. One good example is the MEHS network which is a global network of the alumni of Methodist English High School, Burma (Myanmar). Although it was a missionary high school, as the name says, students who went to this private high school but are now working and living at different corners of the world create a network, one of the major aims of which is to take care the social welfare of their former teachers. This aim has been realizing for more than two decades and is successful. This is because even though it was a Christian missionary school, pupils there were taught the duties since their younger days. The duties are firmly afflicted in their hearts. This shows that distance cannot deter the closeness and ties of cohesive relationship between teachers and pupils.

### **Duties for Sons and Daughters**

- Support the parents in return;
- Manage affairs on their behalf;
- Maintain the honour and the tradition of the family;
- Make oneself worthy of inheritance;
- Offer alms on behalf of the departed parents.

As mentioned above, there are altogether five kinds of duties for sons and daughters to be observed. The first duty is to give support to parents. Myanmar people interpret the word 'support' into two categories: physical support and mental support. Physical support doesn't merely mean providing necessary things and financial assistance but to give personal attendance, for instance, preparing meals for parents and have meals together. Mental support means as simple as giving loving kindness

(Metta) to the parents. When the parents get older, it is a duty for sons and daughters to manage matters on their behalf. These matters can be internal like family affairs as well as business affairs and external like social affairs.

Again it is very important for sons and daughters to maintain the honor and tradition of their family. Those who disgrace their family's dignity are ultimately irresponsible of their duty. Another important duty is to be worthy of inheritance. There are many examples in Jātaka which illustrates about the sons and daughters who were not worthy of inheriting their parents' wealth. They are said to be unworthy of inheritance because they did not pursue education, they were lazy, they were incompetent, they wasted time, and the worst of all, they did not listen to their parents and teachers. As a result, even they were left with massive wealth, they could never sustain those wealth, but they ended their life in poverty. Lessons are learned from these Jātaka stories and children are always taught to become the ones who are worthy of inheritance. When children are taught this duty, it is further elaborated that being worthy of inheritance is an auspicious attribute of good sons and daughters. Thus children who want to become good sons and daughters should not overlook this duty.

Parents are great benefactors for children. For the gratitude we owe to our parents, we, in return take care of our parents when they are old. We look after them, when they are sick. For Buddhists, this is not sufficient. When parents have passed way, it is our duty to do good deeds on their behalf and share those deeds to the departed parents so that if the parents are reborn in unpleasant planes they can receive the share of good deeds and their sufferings can be alleviated. This is a must do duty for all sons and daughters in Myanmar who claim themselves as Buddhists.

Therefore, it is clear that duties for sons and daughters are not only concerned with the welfare of parents' present life but also with after life of the parents. Having learned these simple duties as their responsibility, children usually reluctant to go against these duties for they will be regarded as bad sons and daughters. By fulfilling these duties, sons and daughters are in deed making their relationship with parents stronger.

### **Duties for Teachers**

- Instruct the pupils well
- Admonish and give a good guidance
- Train in all the arts and sciences
- Protect from dangers
- Entrust the pupil to appropriate person

As mentioned above, apart from teaching, there are several tasks for teachers to accomplish according to Buddhist teachings. The meaning of the verses are further elaborated that teacher shall not discriminate among pupils according to their personality, intelligence or background. In addition, when it is said 'admonish', it does not refer to mere preaching but a proper admonishment with constructive attitude and to give pupils a proper guidance. Again it is a teacher's duty to provide academic education as well as to endow the pupils with necessary knowledge which will be useful in their everyday life. Teacher should also aware the fact that pupils are subject to unforeseeable and foreseeable dangers and they should endeavor to protect their pupils from these dangers. That is why when people are in trouble, they usually seek help from their teachers. Whenever people need help or advice and if their parents are incapable of providing one, they can always seek guidance and assistance from

teachers. In fact, teachers become second parents next to the real, biological parents. Teachers are also like shelters for their needy students.

Among all teachers, the Buddha is an unrivaled ideal teacher. He admonished the creatures with *karunā* which is accompanied by *pāṇṇā*. Thus teachers are supposed to teach their pupils with *karunā*. The last duty for a teacher is to entrust the pupil to appropriate person or institution for either further study or career prospect. Nowadays, in this competitive world, the role of referee has become important and essential. Without a good referee and good recommendation, it is hard for young people to join preferable university or to get desirable job. Thus, it is a duty of a good teacher to refer his or her pupil to a place where the latter can shape a better future. For all this teachers earn pupils' care in return as mentioned before. Hence, it helps to strengthen the cohesiveness between teachers and pupils in the long run.

### **Duties for Parents**

- Restrain their children from evil;
- Encourage them to do good;
- Give them education and professional training;
- Arrange suitable marriage for children;
- Handover property as inheritance to them at the proper time.

According to these verses, there are altogether five prominent duties to be observed to become proper parents. These duties are quite simple, yet need a strong will and commitment to accomplish all. The meanings of the verses can be further elaborated as follow. As the Myanmar saying goes, parents are the first teachers of children. Before children are sent to school, they are taught by their parents starting from the manners and etiquette. Then the very first and foremost duty of parents is to deter their children from doing evil deeds. When we say 'evil deeds', it also refers to physical, verbal and mental actions which are irrational, inconsiderate, selfish, unwise and harmful to others as well as one-self. In so doing parents should set themselves as good examples for their children to learn properly. They should be their children's role models. Providing education and professional training for the children is another must do duty for parents. Regarding the duty that is to arrange marriage for sons and daughters, in Myanmar tradition, arranged marriages are not popular in the society. Young people always have the freedom of choice to choose their life time partners. Once they have made suitable choices, parents support them to hold proper wedding by giving their blessing and approval, and also provide necessary support to start a family. Again parents continue to support their children whether or not they live under the same roof with the parents or living separately from their parents. Even when the parents are incapable of supporting their children, the children feel safe just by the existence of their parents. Finally, the well-off parents hand over property to their children as inheritance. Although, these are the duties for parents, they are taught to children in early age so that they can apply in their later life.

In addition to the aforesaid four categories of social duties, the Duties for Leaders are also being taught. This is believed to be necessary on the ground that children are leaders of future and it will be useful to learn these duties since early age.

### **Duties for Leaders**

- Be alert;
- Be motivated;
- Be kind;

- Be patient;
- Be rational in analyzing situations.

The duties for leaders are as simple as all the different sets of duties described above. They are in fact very basic human qualities. Again, Singajā Sayardaw's word choice in translation is very precise that the duties are easy to memorize.

All the above mentioned verses are well explained and widely taught not only in the primary level schools but also in the informal Buddhist summer schools in Myanmar. At these summer schools, children are taught prominent suttas like Maṅgala Sutta, Metta Sutta, Life story of the Buddha and the translated verses of Singāla Sutta. Again, on the back cover of exercise books, these duties are printed. So children who use these exercise books are always aware of the duties. For Myanmar people, these verses are used as yardsticks to justify their behavior. If something undesirable happens, we can always make self analysis through these yardsticks and try to come up with better solutions.

### **Conclusion**

Singāla Sutta highlights the social duties for mankind. These duties can be observed by anyone regardless of race and religious background. It can be said so because Myanmar, although it is composed of different ethnic groups and going multi-culture under the influence of globalization and modernization, it still maintains the cohesiveness in families. People's lifestyle and attitude may change but the values they believe in are not extinct due to the fact that they live with the social duties that they have adopted from Singāla Sutta. Hence, it is obvious that cultivating social harmony is not an impossible endeavor. If each member of society accomplishes their respective responsibility, misunderstandings and resentments that lead to conflicts will be alleviated. One part of building harmonious society is to reconnect people through the social duties which are universal, thus it is timelessly advisable to people of any generation to study these duties and to live with them so as to create harmonious society.

**References:**

Buckles D. (1999). Cultivating Peace. IDRC.

D.P.P.S (2000). How to Live as a Good Buddhist, Volume 1. D.P.P.S Press.

Hla Din (1966). Myanmar translation from Forty years in Burma by Dr. Marks. National Publishing House.

Htee Chai Ti Taw Sayardaw (1998). TharThaMeeHuThe. Nawarat Press.

Jenkins J. (2002). Contemporary Moral Issues. Heinemann.