

A Buddhist Way of Spiritual Care to People in Nepal

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Abstract

Over the last few decades Nepal has demographically changed significantly. This change has brought a variety of problems from family to social level- including funeral services. Senior citizens are the most affected because they are being abandoned by their families and living miserable lives.

In 1999, the Pranidhi Purna Maha Vihara (PPMV) in Nepal introduced two projects ‘Buddhist Senior Citizens Home’ and ‘the arrangements for a funeral’ to provide spiritual care to Senior Citizens based on Buddhist psychology. The project gave members a choice that provides a sense of belonging, creating a caring community which provides comfort. Senior citizens found a new home at the PPMV.

Keywords: Nepal, Senior Citizens, Buddhist Way, Buddhist Care, Funeral

Introduction

Nepal is one of the developing countries in Asia, where the Buddha was born in 623 BC. Nepal’s current population is 30.36 million. Nepal has demographically changed significantly in recent years (Chalise, 2006). Its fertility rate is on the rise, but the mortality rate is relatively low (Singh, S., Upadhyay, A. & Chalise, H. 2021). Meanwhile, life expectancy has increased from 27 years of age in 1951 to over 70 years in 2018 (Sharad Shrestha, 2021). In the

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developed countries retirement age is around 65 whereas in the developing countries it may be less, such as in Nepal where retirement age is 60 years. Over 60 years of age is regarded as senior citizen (Aryal, 2019).

As the country has industrialised and urbanised, Nepal's social structure has changed to a great extent which also presents other challenges. Extended families have gradually become nuclear families. This change has brought other problems at all levels from family to social level and even to national level. Mentally and physically, senior people have become lonely and face life threatening issues. They are also mentally abused and worried about their future life including death and rituals after death.

Traditionally, the family has been the main social institution that provides support before and after death which gives confidence to the dying and frees them from worry before and after death (Anil, 2000). Elderly individuals are experiencing difficulties meeting their basic needs (Sharad Shrestha, 2021). Furthermore, they are often forgotten, left ignored, and sadly the majority are living in very poor conditions that have created multiple problems, including care and funeral services. These are some of the main problems that senior citizens in Nepal are facing: family disowned, abandoned by relatives and on the verge of homelessness and hopelessness.

In order to tackle problems, the government introduced a social welfare council under the Social Welfare Act, 1992 to provide social welfare. One of the main objectives of the council is to offer care to older and helpless people. Under the scheme, elderly homes have been established around the country to render social care for senior citizens who need support and help (www.nepal.gov.np). Further, the government introduced legislation to support senior citizens (Aryal, 2019). It also has encouraged many private organisations to open elderly homes, which provides at least a shelter in their later life.

As the family structure has become a more nuclear society, senior people have begun to feel lonely and gone into depression, even worsened by their family disowning them. (Aryal, 2019). The problems do not end there. Furthermore many of them are affected psychologically and are troubled as they are forced to worry about their death and their life after death. Death rituals and after death rites are important phases of human history, although the concept of death itself is miserable and after death is a mystery. There are various versions of death rituals, known as *samskara*, in Nepal depending on ethnicity, culture and location. The rituals can be very elaborate, which after careful investigation, can be divided into three periods: near death moment, the day of death and after death (Dil Ratna, 2021. Anil, 2000). There are many rituals that will continue after cremation which Dil Ratna argues are irrelevant to modern society and could be ignored or muted, which conservatives have strongly stood against.

The Buddhist Funeral Service is different in its kind as Dil Ratna (2021) remarks and it is more practical in modern society. Nevertheless, currently, a Buddhist funeral or how the Buddhist funeral should be performed in the Nepalese context, does not have a concrete form yet. All Buddhists rituals are being performed as a part of traditional or added services, which Buddhists have comfortably adapted to the culture, to suit the communities.

The objective of this article, therefore, is to study a possible alternative way in a Buddhist environment rather than just a general mainstream service. The project gives senior citizens a compassionate and welcoming environment with the presence of the monastic order, which will provide basic needs to alleviate the financial burden or mental worries of senior citizens. It is not the first of its kind; ‘Banepa Buddhist Old house’ has been established for sometimes. The environment provides spiritual friendship and comfort, which is low cost but holistic spiritual happiness. This article intends to focus on two projects at the Pranidhi Purna Maha Vihara that provide

shelter and make people mentally fit for departure where senior citizens receive Buddhist psychological principles of living, three fold training (tisikkha), four divine abodes (brahmavihara), the fourfold basis of solidarity (Sangahavatthu), four foundations of mindfulness meditation (Satipatthana) and regular chanting. The study is based on documents, in depth interviews and personal field observations.

Introduction to PPMV

Since the revival of Theravada Buddhism in 1930s, (R.B. Vanya, 2007) just over 100 Theravada Buddhist temples have been established around the country in Nepal. Pranidhi Purna Maha Vihara (PPMV) is one of them, which was established in 1942 as a place of worship and it spread the wisdom of Buddhism in the Western region of Chandragiri Municipality 12, Kathmandu Nepal.

Nepal, despite being the birthplace of the Buddha, records stories of expelled venerable monks for their propagation of Buddha's teachings in the country, several times, including during the isolated 'Rana' government in 1930s (Bajracharya et al., 1992. Sarah & David, 2005). Amongst the expelled monks, Karmashil or Pragyananda was hidden in the Balambu village, Chandragiri by the pious devotees, where the villagers had a great opportunity to learn dhamma and gain faith in the Buddha. Later, villagers jointly established the PPMV at the entrance to the village. Currently, there are two monks; Venerable Sukha the abbot and three nuns. Sis Mudita is the senior nun.

Since the establishment of the Vihara, several activities have continued including regular religious ceremonies four times a month; weekend meditation sessions; Saturday Buddhist school and health camps. Recently, the temple has introduced the Buddhist Senior Citizens home (BSCH) and the arrangement for Buddhist Funeral Services (BFC) etc. to give support to members both before and after their departure. The project has given personal, social, and spiritual comfort to members while they are alive and peace of mind for their healthy departure.

The Buddhist Approaches

The Buddha was born in Nepal 623 BC as a prince of Kapilavatthu. In search of truth, he spent six years to achieve the Buddhahood. The teachings, that the Buddha taught for forty-five years were compiled into the Tipitaka or three baskets comprising 84,000 dhammas, which are summarised into morality (sila), mental control (samadhi), and wisdom (panya).

The Buddha spoke widely about the relationship between children and parents and with society. According to Buddha's advice found in Sigalovada Sutta, which He gave to Sigala suggests that one of the responsibilities of a child is to be repaying one's parents in gratitude for what they have done for them (Payutto, 2564). The Buddha also said in the Matapitara sutta (AN1.61-62) that it is not easy to repay what parents have done. However, it can be repaid if one could establish parents in the right faith that would leads to freedom from suffering. Yet, current society somehow is distant from the practice, which has been the major reason of the old age crisis, which is why there is legislation and projects to support them in different forms. It would have been no issue if children had performed dutifully.

Since they are left with only one option- to take refuge in old age home -it is an obligation to follow the regulations and practices which require significant changes and adaptation. As a result, they are bound by certain Buddhist practices once they have decided to join the vihara. These are some of the main Buddhist practices that they are supposed to keep in mind.

Morality in general refers to five basic precepts; (Payutto, 2564) not to kill, not to steal, not to have sexual misconduct, not to lie and not to take any intoxicants. These moral principles are the basis for the harmonious community, which every Buddhist should be mindful and aware of. They are indeed the most important practices of every person who decides to live at

the PPMV residence. Living a moral life provides good ground for cultivating mental development, which assists in having control over one's mind. A controlled mind opens people up to nature and understanding things as they truly are, a true understanding (wisdom).

The Brahnavihara dhamma, 'divine abode or noble abiding' and Sangaha Vatthu dhamma are 'the principles that bind society together' and they are some of the most important teachings related to relationships and how people live together in the society. These qualities bind community together and appear to have been psychologically effective in providing Buddhist care and support at the PPMV in Kathmandu, Nepal.

These four Brahnavihara Dhammas (Mahasi Sayadaw, 1985) are the highest emotional connections that one could express towards the other. It is also a teaching that is concerned with people around us and our attitudes towards them. These are positive expressions that one should develop, which are beneficial to anyone, practitioners and receivers alike. The four Brahnavihara Dhamma is divided into (Payutto, 2564)

- Metta- friendliness or loving-kindness
- Karuna – compassion
- Mudita – goodwill or rejoicing
- Upekkha – equanimity or neutrality

The four Sangaha Vatthu Dhammas (SVD) is another important teaching which provide the necessary qualities to live harmoniously in society. Somdet Phra Buddhaghosacharya (2564) gives a definition that SVD is a 'basis of social solidarity or virtues making for group integration and leadership'. It is these four principles that integrate people from different backgrounds, and help people to show concern for other members of society. In the Anguttara Nikaya (AN 4.32) the Buddha said that these are the foundation for the bonds of fellowship. They are;

- Dana: generosity
- Piyavaca: speaking kind words
- Atthacariya: beneficial help
- Samanattata: Consistency and impartial relationship.

In the four Satipatthana, the establishment of awareness is a highly praised and recommended practice to gain right understanding regarding oneself and others. It is a practice to explore one's own body and mind of own, which teaches how to live a mindful life in different situations and environments. It is a practice to develop the skills to live a harmonious and happy mindful life, which has 3 benefits: good in the present life, good for rebirths and attainment of ultimate goal, Nibbana. The four Satipatthana (Analayo, 2019) are:

- Kayanupassana: contemplation of body
- Vedanapusaana : contemplation on feelings
- Cittanupassana : contemplation on mental states
- Dhammanupassana: contemplation on phenomenon

Daily chanting plays an essential part in monastic life, which is a form of expression and connection to the spiritual life. It is also a form of calming the mind, experiencing joy, developing patience and leads to liberation. Every senior citizen is advised to attend these chantings at the PPMV regularly, as a part of daily activities, (Sukha. N.) which also provide medicine for both mind and body.

The Buddhist Senior Citizens Home in Nepal

"Senior Citizen" according to the Senior citizens Act 2006 of the government of Nepal means a citizen of Nepal having completed the age of sixty years". The clause number 3 states categorically: 'It shall be the duty of all to respect senior citizens.'

Furthermore, senior citizens have been given full rights to choose their preferable place to live. Clause number 4/3 says that ‘No one shall detach the senior citizen from the family or compel the senior citizen to get detached from the family against his or her will.’ Despite the Act, however, its implementation and overall effect seems to be different, due to a variety of reasons: family (Sikuma Rai, 2018), financial or health conditions (Sharad Shresth, 2021).

According to the data collection found, the majority are still living with family members (81%) or spouse (11.6%) and just over 6% living alone (Singh, S., Upadhyay, A. and Chalise, H. (2021). As the country is moving to modernity, children either are engaged in their work or unable to offer time or they are living abroad (Sikuma Rai, 2018), so senior citizens are increasingly being left alone at home or detached from family against their wishes. The study suggests that the number of senior citizens living alone is continuing to rise, which affects other issues such as accommodation, and overall well-being.

According to the Nepalese government’s Social Security Act 2018, women over 60 years and others over 70 years of age are receiving an old age allowance. Social security means financial support that the government intends to provide to citizens for the welfare of people, targeting potential vulnerable ones in the society (Kamala Bhandari, 2019). The Government of Nepal, therefore, introduced various activities and programmes such as ‘Old Age Allowance, Old Age Home NGOs etc (Kamala Bhandari, 2019. The Finance minister Bishnu Prasad Poudel further announced in the fiscal budget of 2021 that ‘1,739,359 people have received an old age allowance’, which gives seniors flexibility in their expenditure and many members of the BFS project pay their membership fee from it. That allowance may be a support for the BFS but would not be sufficient to move to the temple and live at BSCH. Therefore, since BSCH is depends on an individual’s funding, the temple is facing massive challenges. Does PPMV have enough resources to receive and provide basic care to future members? Will the relevant authorities step in to provide support? It is a subject of hope and fortitude.

These are some of the main reasons that care homes or clubs, or shared houses have developed around the country (Singh, S., Upadhyay, A. and Chalise, H. (2021), Sharad Shrestha, 2021). The government established their first care-home at Pashupati temple and later private care-homes have been gradually established around the city. Currently, there are both governmental and private care-homes providing facilities and supporting people in need.

The PPMV has had this project from its start as an option to many. Initially, the project started for two reasons; to build buildings for the vihara to use and provide accommodation to sponsors in their later life. These sponsors were encouraged to be a sponsor of a room while they are still working or capable to pay for the construction of a room. They were also encouraged to come and stay in their later life, if their family disowned or abandoned them. According to Sister Mudita, a senior nun at the vihara, almost all the buildings in the vihara are built by sponsors, but only a few came to stay in their later life, such as Krishnamaya, who was long term member of the vihara. The building or rooms were built for different purposes of the temple, but sponsors could return and occupy it. Buildings, meanwhile, are used for other temple purposes in their absence. Later, the PPMV began to receive members of public who are on the verge of being disowned by their family or have no next of kin and no relatives to look after them. The majority of them were feeling lonely and living hopeless lives. They will be given a place to live, food to eat and encouraged to attend daily chanting and other activities at the temple.

Testimonies

Among the three residents, recently, two have passed away and one new member has just moved in at the vihara. Miss Sita, one of the residents who recently died, unmarried and disowned by her family, never thought that she would end up being in the temple (Sujankirti, 2015). She raised and supported her brothers after their mother passed away. In her 60s, she handed

over all her property to a brother hoping for his support in her later life. Her world turned upside down and she was bullied and treated like a slave in her own house. Although she was living at home the family members were always forcing her to leave. She was desperate to move somewhere, or even to commit suicide as her only option. A friend of hers introduced her to the temple and she moved within a few weeks and lived there for another 8 years.

A similar story is repeated in the case of Krishnamaya in her early 50s diagnosed with paralysis. Her nephew took all her assets and she was thrown out of house. Due to depression and family disownment she was desperate to find a place to move to. She had a long term relationship with PPMV so came to stay at the vihara. The remaining land and houses were also cunningly taken by her sister. She was cared for at the vihara for 9 years.

The new arrival is 65-year-old Keshi, a PhD, divorced, with no family, living alone for few decades. When she was 17 years old, her mother passed away and her father remarried. Life was not a bed of roses, yet she managed to go to America for a better future. Life in the US was not comfortable; she always felt lonely which made her return to Nepal. She married into a different caste and worked as a freelance research scholar in sociology. Married life did not last long as her husband was addicted to alcohol and the daily unhealthy environment at home led her to divorce at the age of 38 and she has lived alone ever since.

Previously two residences were given a place to stay when they were on the verge of being homeless. They were accepted as members of the vihara when their own family rejected them. Monastics were giving spiritual and physical care at the vihara while family and relatives abandoned them.

Similarly, in her interview Mrs Keshi expressed her apprehension: feeling alone and lonely in her flat living a very uninteresting life. Desperate to move to a care-home, she was introduced by a close friend and decided to join the temple

within a few weeks in search of love and care. Although it is too early to say, she expressed in her interview that she is enjoying it, and she has found happiness being in the temple. She also expressed her ignorance about Buddhist temples, monastics, and Buddhist practices but she was eager to learn and participate actively in the temple's activities. Even though she has only been in the temple for a couple of weeks, she is very touched by the love and care that has been shown to her, despite being unfamiliar with the culture.

The Buddhist Funeral Service

Death according to Satipatthana Sutta (MN 10), ' is a state of breaking up and interruption in the life faculty also known as deceasing, passing away or further completion of time in this existence.' Death is often introduced in a negative way and is also the tabooest subject. It has always been a subject of mystery and dread ever since human existence, yet it is certain. It is unknown to all when, where, and how one will die. Therefore, the Buddha encouraged his followers to contemplate death in every moment and be prepared for it. According to Buddhism there are four ways that a human being will die (Aggacitta, 1999):

1. expiration of lifespan
2. productive kamma
3. expiration of both and 4. intervention of a destructive kamma

Funeral ceremonies after death are very different in Nepal based on their religion and ethnicity, which is significantly influenced by Hinduism. Almost all departed ones will be cremated by the riverbank called 'Ghat' and ashes will be washed away in the river. Days of mourning and rituals are also varied based on ethnicity and area.

Traditionally, there is a system called Guthi, in the Newar community, which exists in every village or every community in Nepal, which take care of the funeral services. According to sources in Balambu, where the PPMV lies, there are 18 guthis. The PPMV funeral service is not a guthi nor does it provide a separate service but facilitates and offers spiritual support to its members. One does not have to be a senior citizen to be a member.

The Buddhist funeral service project initially began in 1999 to support members, with a few members registered as lifelong members of the temple, who would pay a fixed amount of a one-off donation to be a member for that year of membership. According to the vihara's record, there were 377 lifelong members in 2020. In 2010, due to modernity, the project was formalised with registration and a monthly deposit for the service. Among the members, including lifelong ones, over 100 people have registered for a Buddhist funeral service and pay a monthly deposit of 20 rupees a month or they can subscribe for a year. In 2020, apart from the yearly subscriptions there are 71 members have paid to continue their membership. Among them, 22 members have died up until now. Up to 5 new members have joined every year since its reorganization in 2010.

Conclusion

Helping a person to the best of one's ability to remove their troubles and miseries is one of the important teachings that is encouraged by the Buddha. Furthermore, in Buddhism a person who possesses these four qualities of *brahmavihara* is known as a noble and emotionally balanced person also known as a father or mother (*brahmati mata pitaro*). The PPMV has offered spiritual care to members and senior citizens in various ways at the vihara in line with the Buddhist principle of *sangahavatthu* as the supporter and protector of senior residential members. This has attracted members to stay at

the vihara. Daily activities are introduced as a part of mindfulness practices that promote healthy living, which is closely assisted by living a moral life, having a controlled mind and skilful means of wisely living.

Members of BFS and Senior citizens are given high quality spiritual and physical love and care by respected venerable monks and nuns. They provide emotional support and encourage them to be independent, sharing and caring. Despite living alone in their homes or at the vihara once they became a member of the project they are not left alone. They are encouraged to attend at least one event in a month if it is not possible to attend all four events. This helps to keep an eye on one another and share friendliness and caring. Monastic members act as friends, guardians and spiritual teachers providing a great support so that every member feels at home and emotionally connected. Both projects BSCH and BFS have provided support not only during people's lives but also after their departure which has given spiritual comfort to all members.

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