

Buddhist Cardinal Principles for Peace and Harmony*

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Abstract

Buddhism may rightly be asserted as a religion of peace in that it ultimately aims to achieve ultimate bliss. Buddha laid emphasis on ways and means to lead a peaceful living both for individual and society. Buddhist literature is a concrete proof that peace is highly regarded as a cornerstone in the Buddhist system of thought. With the growing outbreak of terrorist attacks, violence, abuse, dispute, tension, conflicts and wars in the contemporary world, it is getting more demanding to take immediate steps to find solutions to these crises.

Keyword: Buddhist Cardinal; Peace; Harmony

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Introduction

First and foremost, it is imperative to see what ‘peace’ signifies. Generally speaking, the notion of ‘peace’ refers to ‘absence of strife among groups, whether they are regarded as classes, communities, races or nations’. However, in Buddhism the primary emphasis is on the individual aspect of peace. In the ultimate analysis, peace (*santi*) is a psychological condition or attitude which is devoid of conflict. It may be defined as ‘a subjective quality having an individual centre and manifestation’ as the *Sutta-Nipāta* (verse 837) refers to ‘internal peace’ (*ajjhatta santi*) as resulting from the elimination of ideological and other conflicts of the mind (O.H. De A., 2016).

The *Sutta Nipāta* (verse 260) further states that satisfactory external i.e. environmental conditions are also necessary for healthy and peaceful social life. Thus peace in general social sense is only the end result of the cultivation of peaceful mind by the individuals who are the ultimate unit of the social community. Apparently, from the Buddhist standpoint, peace of community springs from individual peace, and this micro scale can be extended to the macro scale.

In the contemporary perspective, world peace or peace on Earth is ‘an ideal state of freedom, peace, and happiness among and within all nations and people. Quoted here is a statement that suggests the path to attain world peace.

‘If enough people achieve a sense of Inner Peace in their life, and if those people unite together for a common cause, then the natural result will be World peace. World peace is ‘not merely an absence of war, but a true and lasting peace.’ This concept can best be illustrated by the following formula.

$$\text{Inner Peace} + \text{Unity} = \text{World Peace}$$

As stated above, when external conditions conducive to attain peaceful harmonious life are intently fulfilled in peaceful hearts, world peace can be achieved.

This paper attempts to propose how the Buddhist cardinal principles are relevant to foster peace and harmony in the contemporary world. In particular, it will focus on the grounds of social harmony or amity (*saṅgaha vatthu*) and their correlation to the sublime abodes (*brahmavihāra*) which are potent antidotes to the root causes of the conflicts and violence. Importantly, these two principles share a common platform of transcending self and other negative emotional states of mind. Modes of unity come to completion when fortified by sublime attitudes. Among these two main principles, I initially would like to discuss *brahmavihāra* as I consider it to be the prerequisites for performing *saṅgaha vatthu*.

Brahmavihāra, Potent antidote to violence

In Buddhism, the psychological attitude tending to peace in society is further analyzed into four cardinal states of thought and feeling called the Four Sublime Attitudes (*brahmavihāra*). Wijesekera emphasizes that all social relationships, according to the Buddha, have to be based on these four modes or attitudes and thus they are regarded as representing the highest conditions for social well-being. In fact, it may be rightly asserted that the concept of the *brahmavihāras* sums up the whole of the Buddhist social philosophy and gives it in a nut-shell (Wijesekera, 1960).

Premasiri (1987) observes that Buddhism teaches two acts of virtues that are said to have important social implications. These virtues are in fact the positive aspects of Buddhist morality, going beyond mere non-doing of certain evil acts. Both these sets of virtues are to be cultivated in opposition to the negative mental traits such as greed, selfishness, envy, malice etc.”

They are called *brahmavihāra* because even the great *Brahmā* is said to have practised them (G.Dharmasiri, 1986). Contextually, the term ‘*vihāra*’ is used to indicate these states that should be constantly present in the mind. They are limitless and, hence, called *Appamaññā*. An individual who cultivates these qualities is beyond all biases and prejudices and, above all, beyond all kinds of limitations such as those pertaining to race, nationality, religion, caste, class, and clan and so on (Nyanaponika Maha Thera, n.d.). The *brahmavihāra* are extremely important for personality development.

Loving-kindness (*mettā*)

The first sublime attitude *mettā* indicates the exercise of friendliness towards one’s fellow-beings in all situations. It is a positive state of mind, defined as “the desire to bring about the happiness and well-being of others in society”. In fact, such friendliness or universal love is regarded in Buddhism as the basis of all social ethics, the cornerstone of the edifice of Buddhist benevolence or goodwill among men which is essential to peace. Buddhism uses *mettā* as the antidote to such evil and antisocial tendencies as malevolence (*vyāpāda*) and violence (*hiṁsa*) which engender peace (Wijesekera (1960).

Importantly, in the Buddhist framework, *mettā* should be distinguished from a few other mental states that have a close resemblance to it. When it is said that one should cultivate *mettā* just as a mother does towards her only child, it becomes apparent that it should be done without any expectation of personal gain. Potent *mettā* generates a unique force that unites all beings irrespective of any kind of division or barrier. As it eliminates all differences ranging from

minor ones to all that lie as root causes of war, *mettā* becomes the most vital and fundamental human force in social ethics.

As *mettā* shatters all political, economic, social or cultural differences and conflicts, and brings about development of all beings the *Itivuttaka* says that all other wholesome states are not worth a one-sixteenth portion of *metta*. More importantly, the latter three sublime attitudes have *mettā* as the foundation. It implies that in one *mettā* is lacking, the other three cannot thrive.

Compassion (*karuṇā*)

The *Visuddhimagga* describes compassion as attitude that trembles in the mind of the virtuous on seeing others in distress and the desire to remove bane and sorrow from one's fellow beings. It is sometimes denoted by other synonymous terms such as sympathy, kindness, pity, mercy, etc. *Pāli* terms like *anukampā*, compassion and *dayā*, sharing of others' sorrow are also contextually used to signify compassion (O.H.de A. Wijesekera, 1978). Essentially, this virtue helps to eliminate cruelty and indifference to the pain and suffering of others (Wijesekera, 1960).

The sacrifices the Buddha underwent for aeons, aiming at the welfare of all beings symbolize His great compassion. The object of loving-kindness and compassion are different. While all living beings become the object of *mettā*, only those who are suffering become the object of *karuṇā*. However, as all beings are subject to suffering, they naturally come within the purview of *karuṇā*. One who cultivates *mettā* equates others with himself and pervades them all with the same friendliness. *Karuṇā* activates one to save others who are in suffering (Hattiarachchi, 2001).

If one volunteers in a selfless, self-sacrificing, intelligent and skillful manner to help others, then that could be called *karuṇā*. This is termed as 'service' or beneficent act (*att hacariyā*) which will soon be discussed in the context of the *saṅgaha vatthu*. The necessity of a virtue like *karuṇā* is all the more felt in the contemporary world beset with all sort of calamities and distresses, both natural and man-made. Hence, compassion, just as loving-kindness, is or even more an essential virtue for the sustenance of the world. Significantly, the act of giving, kind speech and service to others become more expressive in the compassionate heart.

Appreciative joy (*muditā*)

The third aspect is '*muditā*' or altruistic joy or appreciative joy which is the ability to rejoice at another's success and prosperity. Naturally, human beings tend to compare other's success or well-being with oneself. The fact of

others enjoying more success tends to make one mentally upset and get envious at them. This would generate harm to the society. This basic attitude is meant to counteract all feelings of jealousy and rivalry in social dealings. Hence it is as significant for social concord and peace as the other two *brahmavihāras* (Wijesekera, 1960).

If one can transcend the thought of self (*atta*) and appreciate other's success, such attitude would provide a good foundation for social peace and harmony. Accordingly, it is observed that *mudita* epitomizes the victory of unselfishness over selfishness. Though not often discussed like the former two, *muditā* is undoubtedly a virtue that is conducive to both individual and spiritual advancement as well as to social progress.

Equanimity (*upekkhā*)

Upekkhā is the ability to remain indifferent and unperturbed by censure and praise one would receive. It connotes the meaning of acting in such a way as not to disparage others and praise oneself. Hence, it is said to be a virtue with special significance to the social workers (Wijesekera, 1978). It is a stable attitude of mind which does not respond rapidly, rather remains calm in encounter with the objects.

Remarkably, this virtue springs as a result of realistically understanding the nature of mutual social relations as well as through a deep understanding of the operation of the law of *kamma*. At times it is equated with 'impartiality' (*saṃānattatā*). Though its social relevance is not quite obvious as in the case of the other factors, equanimity (*upekkhā*) provides a firm foundation necessary for the meaningful establishment of these three factors.

With regard to *upekkhā*, it must be admitted that the concept appears to be 'subjective' and lacking in that character of reciprocity which the other three implied. It is true that the term etymologically signifies 'indifference' or rather 'disinterestedness'. Such an interpretation would naturally divest the term of its social significance. But the incidence of the word in early Buddhist literature clearly shows that it is of as great social value as the other *Brahmavihāras* (Wijesekera, 1960).

Having seen the *brahmavihāra* and its implication, it is time to discuss fourfold *saṅgaha vatthu* and their correlation to *brahmavihāra*.

Fourfold ground for social harmony (*Saṅgaha vatthu*)

Fourfold *saṅgaha vatthu* as described in the *Āṅguttara Nikāya* should be noted thus:

1. Giving (*dāna*),
2. Endearing speech (*peyyāvajja*),
3. Beneficent conduct (*atthacariyā*), and
4. Impartiality (*saṁānattatā*).

First, the term ‘*saṅgaha*’ is to be understood. Being derived from prefix ‘*saṁ*’ meaning ‘together’ + ‘*gaha*’ (*ganhāti*) meaning ‘hold, grasp’, ‘*saṅgaha*’ literally means ‘inclusion, bringing together, holding together,’ Bodhi asserts that *saṅgaha vatthu* are ‘means by which one can attract others and sustain a relationship with them characterized by friendliness and respect.’ He further proposes that to adequately capture the dual nuance of *saṅgaha*, two words might have been used, “attract and sustain.” It may rightly be posited that *saṅgaha vatthu* attracts and unites people, and sustains integration. Bodhi asserts that these principles under diverse worldly conditions are suitable to fit each case, as means of sustaining a favourable relationship (Bhikkhu Bodhi, 2012).

So pivotal they are to social ethics that they are compared to the axle knob of a chariot. Further to their cohesive power, their unifying power is such that it is likened to the bond that exists in parent-children relationship. The *Metta sutta* also draws an analogy to bring out the close relationship that could be developed among beings through the cultivation of *mettā*. Importantly, even such close relationships could be ruptured if the four qualities are not duly cultivated. The chariot of society would not move forward if this axle-knob is not there (T. Endo, 1987).

The social implications of giving, *dāna*, are brought out even more clearly in the context of this four principles: generosity, kind speech, service, and equal treatment (Ananda W.P. Guruge and G.D. Bond, 1998). In this grouping, generosity, *dāna*, is one of the cardinal principles of social life and has the connotation of sharing what one has for the common welfare (The *Āṅguttara Nikāya* (IV. 364).

Generosity (*dāna*)

The first in the list of four ‘*saṅgahavatthu*’ is charity (*dāna*). *Dāna* which denotes giving, sharing, generosity, liberality is not merely a basic virtue but a practice with social and spiritual implications. The literature of *Theravāda* provides many illustrations of the way that giving serves as one of the pivotal and united factors on the Buddhist path. In the *Theravāda* context, generous

giving provides a way of cultivating and attaining the twin ideals of the religion: compassion and wisdom.

The inclusion of *dāna* at the head of this grouping demonstrates the central place that it has in the path and connection it has to the key goals such as wisdom. In many contexts, *dāna* appears as the foremost factor to initiate the practice be it perfection or meritorious deeds. The pattern of these perfections shows that *dāna* is linked with concepts that have to do with both the good of the individual and the welfare of the society. By practising generosity, one develops the qualities that lead to one's own liberation while also fostering the material and spiritual development of the community.

Buddhist texts mention three kinds of gift - material sources, (*āmisadāna*), sharing the *Dhamma* with others (*dhammadāna*), and non-fear (*abhayadāna*). The first category consists of almsgiving to the *saṅgha* as well as to the needy. Gifts to the *saṅgha* still represent a ceremonially and socially important act of charity. Included in this form of *dāna* is the provision of requisites, amenities, and services to monasteries, charitable institutions and persons needing assistance. Gifts of time and energy in the service of the poor and the disadvantaged also fall into this category. Gift of time is also assumed to be a great gift as time spent can never be retrieved.

Secondly, there is the gift of *dhamma* (*dhammadāna*). Wide-ranging educational activities from teaching and preaching to publication, whether related directly to the propagation of the word of the Buddha or not, continue to be recognized as the 'gift of *dhamma*'. It is the '*Dhamma* gift' that excels all other gifts as extolled by the Buddha in the *Dhammapada*.

Lastly, there is the grant of security and sanctuary (*abhayadāna*) (literally, the gift of a fear-free status). The Buddha reminds us that

'All tremble at violence, all fear death.'

Putting other in the place of another, one should not kill nor cause another to kill.'

Non-fear is the greatest practice in Buddhism. To free ourselves from all fear, we must touch the ground of our being and train ourselves to look directly into the light of compassion. Hanh (2006) asserts that non-fear is the greatest gift we can offer to those we love. Nothing is more precious. But we cannot offer that gift to others unless we have it.

Symbolically practised by buying and releasing animals destined for slaughter or birds and fish kept in captivity, this kind of *dāna* comprises all acts of mercy. It is also customary in Myanmar that people take the opportunity to release animals free from confinement, especially birds, fish, cows, etc. on some special occasions including Myanmar New Year day and their birthdays. Obviously, the act of *dāna* is closely intertwined with compassion and loving-kindness. In my opinion, the same goes true with the other two virtues:

appreciative joy and equanimity as well. Only when one can overcome jealousy, grudge and partiality etc., one can perform generosity. Notably, *dāna* is also considered to relate to service, *atthacariyā*, and to the principle of treating all beings equally, *samānattatā*.

In elucidating the concept of charity, texts lay more emphasis on its social relevance. Non-charity leads to hoarding, bringing about scarcity elsewhere. This causes imbalance and disparity, and even exploitation of resources. This will cause quick diminishing and even destruction of resources. This is well described in the *Aggañña Sutta*.

Hattiarachchi quoted the *Kūṭadanta* and the *Cakkavattisīhanāda Suttas* to postulate that charity becomes still more important in the field of politics and governance. The latter *sutta* shows how misdirected charity even causes unexpected social problems. These *Suttas* explain the special significance of charity in the process adopted by rulers to minimize the gap between the rich and the poor. In this way, generosity seems to have various possible implications: in the area of social, religious, and political.

Endearing speech (*piyavajja*)

The second factor in the *saṅgahavatthu* is ‘*piyavajja*’ which is speech that is endearing and amicable, sincere, free from harshness, and that are useful. The Buddha gives much importance to speech because speech is the first step for producing harmony and friendship.

In the *Sāleyyaka Sutta*, the Buddha advocates kinds of speech that should be expressed to promote friendship and harmony.

“Abstaining from harsh speech, one should speak words that are gentle, pleasing to the ear, and lovable, as go to the heart, are courteous, desired by many, and agreeable to many.”

Additionally, it is important that one abstain from malicious speech and speak words that reunite those who are divided and promote friendships, that rejoice in concord and delights in concord. Abandoning gossip, one should speak at the right time, speaks on what is good, and speaks on the *Dhamma* and discipline, words that are worth recording, reasonable, moderate, and beneficial.

We all are aware that words uttered through anger, jealousy, selfishness, conceit, greed are all provocative and unpleasant. Such speech can only cause rifts in society. On the contrary, words spoken through compassion, kindness, equality, charity and concern for others are always dear and pleasant. Such words are capable of dispelling old rifts, hatred, anger and forging new bonds of friendship, and such instances are commonly seen in a society. It is just common knowledge that harsh speech uttered through conceit due to power, wealth, high

office, caste and other reasons disrupt interpersonal relations in society (Hattiarachchi, 2001). In fact, words can bring great chances to our lives.

In the *Kosambiya Sutta*, the Buddha laid down the six principle of cordiality that would create love and respect and conduce to cohesion, to non-disrepute, to concord, and to unity. It begins with maintaining bodily acts of loving-kindness, verbal acts of loving-kindness and mental acts of loving-kindness both in public and private towards his companions in the holy life. Contextually, maintaining loving-kindness in all activities are principles of cordiality that creates love and respect, conduces to cohesion, to non-dispute, to concord and unity (Bhikkhu Bodhi, 2012).

From these instances, it is observed that words alone are sufficed to stabilize friendship, to strengthen relationships, to induce workers to perform their jobs honestly and increase production. Undoubtedly of all forms of communication, speech is the most effective one. In the words of Hattiarachchi, speech is a special ability of man, and language is his special creation. If man can use language properly for noble means of communication, social life would be extremely pleasant and fruitful. (2001).

As discussed earlier, it is clear that endearing speech and loving-kindness, compassion, etc. are correlating, one fostering the other. Without these sublime attitudes, endearing speech would be just superficial. Likewise, loving-kindness and compassion may not get manifested without the endearing speech because it is the verbal manifestation of these virtues.

Beneficent conduct (*atthacariyā*)

‘*Atthacariya*’ is benevolent action. The term ‘*attha*’ is used in canonical texts both in a mundane and supramundane sense, i.e. in a worldly and spiritual sense. In the case of ‘*sangahavatthu*’, it is used more in a mundane sense and this is because of its impact on strengthening social relations or securing social peace and harmony (Hattiarachchi, 2001). Such benevolent action also appears in the list of ten meritorious deeds (*puññakiriyā vatthu*) in the name of service (*veyyāvacca*). In this category, generosity (*dāna*) appear to be first and this social service or an act of merit stands as the fifth one (Guruge and Bond, 1998). These days, lots of humanitarian aid and services on the fundamental needs of the needy ones and occasional aids in time of natural disasters would come under the broad umbrella of this social service.

The Buddha exhorted His disciples to go forth for the welfare of many, for the happiness of many, out of compassion for the world, for the good, for the happiness of gods and man. At the same time, Buddha Himself provides service to the needy and sick, and cure the mental illness through preaching *dhamma*. Significantly, the *Ānguttara Nikāya* remarks that the best form of service is

instilling in people the virtue of faith (*saddhā*), morality (*sīla*), generosity (*cāga*), and wisdom (*paññā*) (AN. IV. 364). This teaching also highlights close relation of generosity and service. Whatever action, mental, physical or verbal aimed at the well-being of others is ‘*atthacariya*’. Conversely, the opposite action not only brings about the downfall of the society, but even the ruination of the individual (Hattiarachchi, 2001).

Impartiality (*samānattatā*)

Impartiality (*samānattatā*) is the last item in the four grounds of harmony. Herein ‘*atta*’ means oneself. Impartiality (*samānattatā*) means to consider oneself as being equal or similar to others and to act with such understanding. This hinders one from assuming oneself to be superior and inferior in comparison with others and; me and mine in terms attachment or possession. It helps reduce conceit and selfishness and one would not discriminate between one’s own benefit and benefit of others (Hattiarachchi, 2001). Without impartiality, one might feel inferior at the success of others. Likewise, one tends to get afflicted with sorrow on seeing those in suffering. In this way, impartiality oversees and helps other sublime states are in balance.

Thus in ‘*samānattatā*’ is embodied the totality of the functions of the four *brahmavihāras*. It is only through equality that it is possible to raise the society to a level that makes it suitable for humans. This understanding and consequent action would certainly not run the society into a paradise. Yet, it is possible that at least wars which threaten the existence of all beings would disappear; at least then there would no longer be those who die of starvation among others who are given to over indulgence in sensual pleasures.

Conclusion

In this way, each and every factor of these cardinal principles has the potential to nurture peace and unity. More importantly, they are mutually inclusive and closely intertwine with each other engendering potential to yield the expected outcome. They may well be summed up in the single virtue of benevolence which is the antidote of conflicts and hatred which lie at the bottom of every type of tension. Additionally, benevolence promotes the cultivation of social virtues to be free from all personal bias or self-hood. I have proposed that these cardinal principles are self-transcending and essential foundation for peace. If every individual put these into practice, the world will become a peaceful and pleasant home to live in. This is the Path revealed by the Buddha for the mankind to walk along.

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