

Contribution of the Sangha to Contemporary Society

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The starting point of Buddhism

Since the establishing of the Buddhist Sangha it has been working for the welfare of all human beings, as it is initially intended to be, in various ways spiritually or materially whenever it is required. In fact the starting point of Buddhism is to help all human beings irrespective of whoever they are, and whatever religions and communities they belong to. The story of Bodhisatta Sumedha highlights that the spirit of concerns for others is the basis of Buddhism. With this spirit only Sumedha struggled to attain the Buddhahood. With the spirit of caring for others, the Buddha started preaching the Universal Truth to all mankind. Countless followers of Him benefited from His teaching and guiding. Not only the Compassionate himself engaged in the affair of guiding people for their own good, he also encouraged his Bhikkhu community to work for all without discrimination at all. His instruction to the Bhikkhu is: “Bhikkhu go forth on journey; teach the universal truth; for the welfare of the many, for the happiness of the many, out of compassion.” Quoting this phrase, some scholars identify Buddhism as humanism. It speaks about not only the prospective gain of the human beings but also their material and physical need. With this perspective Buddhism is unique of its kinds in which theory and practice have been interwoven in every state of their feasibility. In brief the Buddhism stands in a glorious momentum of progress for the cause of the universal human interest. Following the path of the Master many of his sincere followers continued carrying out for the good of all for many centuries even after His demise. Even if the Buddha is not present to us anymore, the spirit of human welfare which led him to become the Buddha is still made alive by his unbroken Bhikkhu Sangha in our modern contemporary time.

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As the title suggests, this article is not intended to explore and show the early history account of the role of Sanghas in its contemporary society. Rather its primary intention is to highlight the role of modern Sangha in modern Myanmar society, to bring out the fact of Sangha involvements in social welfare. Therefore this article will address the questions of Sangha and the role it plays in its society. But I would like to remind you that this article is not scholarly written with a complete and satisfied research. Rather it is written to share personal experiences in some of which either with physical involvement or with knowledge learned from third party who physically involved, and from various information such as journals, news, photos, video clips given by blogs, and internet websites. Thanks to modern information technology for making the service of Sangha accessible to all.

Myanmar and Sangha Community

Myanmar is one of the major countries following Theravada Buddhism. Its population is about 60 billions 85 percent of which are Buddhists. And there is a State Sangha Committee to undertake the Sangha matters. The Sangha is the most well-organised formation after the military. According to 1997 estimates, there are 51,322 monasteries in Myanmar that house 406,903 monks. This number matches with that of the army's strength of about 400,000. While 167,562 are well-groomed monks, 239,341 are novices. These include 24,043 nuns. An estimated number of 406,903 Sangha in one nation, of course, is not a joke. Many Buddhists of the nation have been sharing the responsibility to take care of them for many centuries. They will do the same in the future as well. However, a little is known to supporters as to the contributions of Sangha to people in turn. What are the contributions of the Sanghas? To what extent do they participate in working for the society?

Contribution of Sangha

We can generally identify three ways through which Bhikkhu Sangha can get involved into the welfare of the society. General classifications of them are through: (i) religion, (ii) education, and (iii) social work.

(1) Contribution through Religion

Since the Sangha Community was formed with the purpose mostly considered as religious, their contributions to the society in which they live have been through religion. In other words, this contribution is spiritual

other than material. This contribution is desirable in time of peace. This service is usually considered as part of religious contribution for the reason that it has something to do with it. Religious contributions are such as studying the religious literature, training children of the same faith, imparting and teaching the knowledge of dhamma to other fellow Bhikkhus and laymen alike, preaching the dhamma to the public's in certain ceremony, participating in special occasions or performing religious rituals in funeral ceremony of their fellow men.

We see that almost all members of the Sangha involve in one or the other matters. Their involvements in these matters are regarded religious because of the fact that they hardly have anything to do with the other faith followers, but with the same faith only. Therefore the framework within which they function is too narrow. Some may argue that we also share our knowledge with different religions, so our religious performance has some relationship with them. But in my opinion this is not relevant to argue so. Every religious service is always directed to the followers of the same religion. Those followers are just parts of the nation which is in turn part of the human race. Contribution of Sangha through religion is limited, though not purposely, to its own community. Therefore when we consider working for the welfare of human beings as a whole, we should not stick to one way – through religious performance – but we should find the alternative to extend our goodwill to people regardless of their beliefs.

(2) Contribution through Education

The contemporary Sangha could manage to find another way to contribute their effort in helping the nation. It is through education that they are able to make their contributions. I feel that I should remind you that education here does not include religious education as I consider it as a part of religion which already discuss. Education here is concerned exclusively with secular and worldly types which focus only on the well-being of human life, and which has nothing to do with liberation. In other word, this is modern education other one.

In carrying out this mission some Sangha members set up schools what they call in Myanmar-Phonedawgyithin Panyaryay Kyaung, Monastic Education in English. Some schools operate as primary schools some as secondary. They teach modern subjects in the same way as the government schools do. These schools are initially meant for orphans but later turned into schools open for all regardless of race and religion. Education given by these schools is free. So children of poor family can have access to education without much worry. You may ask me if primary education in

Myanmar is not free. So far as I know, yes it is but in principle, in practice it is the other way around. Here I am not talking about the principle but the social reality. I am not talking about the government education policy but the fact. Nevertheless this is not my point.

In different corner of the country ranging from the old capital to the remote villages, there are many monastic education schools operated by Sangha. Although the schools are headed by Sangha members in managing, they are operated with the help of lay teachers in teaching. There are some Sangha who participate in teaching but just a few. It would be good if more of them could join in teaching too. It is also the fact that most of Sangha are lack of modern education. Therefore it is impossible to ask them to take part. But this difficulty can be overcome if we start preparing for that. Before we start this there are certain conditions which need to be fulfilled.

In the first place, it is necessary for Sangha to have a strong will to help, and this has to do with the individual. Second Sangha should be permitted (by the authority) to study modern secular subjects in any schools and universities. This will help make the study easy and comfortable. All of us know that there are some undeclared restrictions of Sangha from learning modern education from government schools and universities except Sangha Universities which exclusively meant for religious study. If they are banned to study, they got to find a different path to reach the destination. They would be very much appreciated if the unnecessary restriction is removed and let things go easy. When necessary and sufficient conditions are fulfilled, the role of Sangha in education arena will be brighter than before. Therefore Sangha's contributions in the front of education need to be strengthened. Teaching systems need to be promoted to meet the modern standard. And the numbers of schools need to be increased to meet the demand.

(3) Contribution through Social Work

There are types of social work. It includes any of various services designed to aid the poor and aged, to increase the welfare of children, to help improve the lives of people, group, and society, and to provide social services to those members of the community that need it. Working to improve human condition and committing to the development of the full potential of each individual, group and community in the society are also social works. To what extent, do Sangha involve in the area of social work. When I consider it I set aside the controversy that Sangha is the spiritual leader, and therefore is not supposed to get involved in the secular affairs. Instead I will focus on the fact and present it objectively as much as I can.

Because I assume that Sangha should do social work to the extent that can be permitted, and suitable to being Sangha.

There have been many Sangha members who share not only the idea that Sangha should contribute in the social welfare, but who practically contribute in that. Sangha's contributions in this field are such as building hospital, opening healthcare center with cheaper cost to the common and free for those who cannot afford medical expenses, forming organization for free service for funeral matters, helping HIV/AIDS patients and so on. So far as I know there is no dispute on carrying out these above mentioned social works. All of these projects are led by the eminent and competent Sangha. This may be the reason why nobody objects. Another reason is that Sangha's involvement is confined to the status of being a president, or to the leading role, but not in the basic level of work which can be done by using physical body only. For example, although they found healthcare center, they do not do the job of treatment like a doctor and nurse does. They may set up schools for children, but only a few of them participate in teaching job.

But there were also instances in which Sangha involved physically. In Mandalay, a fire usually breaks out one or twice in a year. Every time it happens Sangha never hesitates to get involved in extinguishing fire, evacuating people and providing shelter for the victims in their monastery. No complaint is heard in this case due to the emergency. We also have seen how Sangha has helped the Nargic cyclone victims. They did all sorts of job mostly physically to distribute the aid to the survivors living in different areas. The difficulty and problem they have overcome is unimaginable in the history of delivering humanitarian aid. The government machinery is invariably slow in responding to this natural disaster. It takes some time for it to wake from its sleep. It is natural, therefore, for the Sangha to rise in such a vacuum. History has shown that at times of natural disaster it was the Sangha and the Buddhist temple that took that leadership. The temple doors were opened to everyone without any discrimination. It was a human tragedy, and Sangha treated all alike without any taboos or restrictions. They did these not to gain fame, not for recognition, not for gain or to achieve any ulterior objective; but out of compassion for which the Buddhist term is *karuna*. We have to salute them for their dedication and untiring efforts.

If we compare the number of Sangha members staying in the whole country with the number of Sangha involving in social work, we will find that the latter is very less. But the performance of them is somewhat more effective than other free services headed by laymen. Most of the organizations

established for social services are maintained with the support of lay people from home and abroad as well. Half of them are led by the country well-known dhamma preachers, and their projects can run smoothly. Because only they can easily receive mass donations of the Buddhists by preaching the dhamma sermon. There were some Sangha who attempted to form organization for the social welfare, but they finally gave it up because of lack of support. But there are also Sangha who never thought of doing such work, but always mind how to maintain their monastery and construct new huge building without being necessary to do so.

While most of Sangha member are not aware of doing social work up to this day, many of other religious leaders have started working for this cause a long time ago. I am not sure whether they have been waken from their slumber by the nargic cyclone that swept away many lives and rendered people homeless and thousands of children destitute and orphaned. Nargic cyclone challenged not only the inner qualities of caring and sharing, generosity, compassion, love and kindness, but also the capacity and the sense of responsibility of the Sangha in Myanmar. It is a fact that most of them were at a loss what to do. The most they can do is expressing feeling which sounds sympathetic. But there are also some prominent and competent Sangha who has done a very remarkable job in helping those who are the victims of the natural disaster. These Sangha are both idealists and pragmatists. They know that it is the time to give them the immediate relief. I wish many more of Sangha, if not all, 50 percent, would involve in the social work and at the same time prepare for the unseen calamitous situations.