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The Significant Role of Saddhā in Theravāda Buddhist Thought

Win Maung

Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to show the significant role of Saddhā in Theravāda Buddhist Thought. The word saddhā means faith, belief, confidence, conviction. Saddhā is neither mind nor matter. It is good mental property, cetasika. In Theravāda Buddhist literatures Buddha Himself taught that saddhā is the noblest quality of a man by which the circle of rebirth can be overcome and it is the best attitude to acquire knowledge. According to Theravāda Buddhism, Saddhā, as a great strength, can destroy and eradicate opposition. The role of faith can be found obviously in other non-Buddhist thoughts. It is also used widely in religion, politics, economics and sociology. Saddhā, faith, therefore, plays a vital role in life and society. In this paper, the meaning and nature of saddhā, its kinds, its role, its necessity and insufficiency etc, will be described.

Key words: Saddhā, Theravāda Buddhism

Introduction

Saddhā and Theravāda Buddhist Thought

In Theravāda Buddhist thought Saddhā plays an important role as in other religions. According to the Buddha's doctrine, Saddhā (faith) is the noblest quality of man by which the circle of rebirth can be overcome. It is a necessary factor to acquire knowledge. Saddhā as a great power can suppress all oppositions. Saddhā is thus useful both in mundane and supermundane. The concept of saddhā is used deeply in Myanmar Buddhist society. All true Myanmar Buddhists believe in the Three Gems, theory of moral actions, the advantages of alms giving, the past, the present and future life, the merit and demerit, the benefit and care of parents, deliverance, and the power of mind etc. Saddhā, thus, is important in Myanmar Buddhists life, religion, thought and culture. Other non-Buddhist also widely accept the concept of faith. But Saddhā, and faiths in the other systems are radically different. In this paper, the significant role of Saddhā in Theravāda Buddhist thought will be described. Saddhā, like effort, wisdom and concentration, therefore, plays an important role in Myanmar Theravāda Buddhist thought and culture.
1. The Meaning and Nature of Saddhā

Saddhā plays an important role in Myanmar Theravāda Buddhist thought and culture. Saddhā is a kind of faith or belief but it differs from the meaning of faith as interpreted in non-Buddhist thought. It has distinctive characters. The term saddhā has occupied a vital role in Theravāda Buddhism and Myanmar culture.

Saddhā is a Pāli word meaning उपसङ्ग्रहण in Myanmar. The closest meaning in English would be confidence or conviction. Saddhā is sometimes translated as belief or faith. Saddhā means faith in what ought to be believed. In fact the words belief and faith are used more in non-Buddhist religions, such as, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Judaism and other different kinds of religions. Saddhā as understood by Myanmar Buddhists, is different from such belief or faith which is mentioned in other religions in which God or Supernatural Being is taken as the object of faith and worship. Though there are some different points among non-Buddhist systems, there is a similarity or likeness that God is obviously accounted as creator, sustainer, controller, destroyer of the world. God is also assumed as saviour of everything. All adherents in those systems believe totally in God.

The concept of Saddhā and faith or belief in God is radically different. The nature of saddhā in Buddhist thought is explained by Venerable Ashin Thittila as follows:

Buddhism does not demand blind faith from its adherents: here mere faith is dethroned and replaced by confidence, saddhā as it is known in Pāli, based on knowledge of truth. The confidence placed by a follower in the Buddha is like that of a sick man towards the physician or that of a student toward his teacher. A Buddhist seeks refuge in the Buddha because it is he who discovered the path of deliverance. A sick man should use the remedy which the physician prescribes in order to be cured, and the pupil should study what his teacher says in order to become learned. In just the same way, a Buddhist who possesses saddhā should also follow the Buddha’s instructions in order to gain deliverance. (Thittila, 2000)

We should therefore note that the usage of saddhā is not the same as that of belief or faith in other religions, so it is more meaningful and significant than belief or faith in non-Buddhist systems. According to Nyanatiloka,
Saddhā, Faith, Confidence: A Buddhist is said to have faith if he believes in the Perfect One’s (The Buddha) enlightenment or in the three Jewels, by taking his refuge to them. His faith, however, should be reasoned and rooted in understanding and his faith. A Buddhist’s faith is not in conflict with the spirit of inquiry, and doubt about dubitable things is admitted and inquiry into them is encouraged. (Nyanatiloka, 2003)

According to the above explanation, the concept of saddhā accepted by Myanmar Theravada Buddhism is based on reason and understanding. There is no room for doubt, unseen things in it. So it is more realistic than the other definitions of faith.

2. Saddhā is a Type of Mental Property

In the Buddhist theory of ultimate reality, mind, citta, and mental factors, cetasikas, are inseparable. A mental property is neither matter nor is it mind, consciousness. It depends on mind but it leads and determines the mind. There are fifty-two kinds of mental property. These fifty-two kinds of mental properties can be classified into three groups; wholesome mental properties, unwholesome mental properties and mental properties that are associated with good and bad consciousness. Of the wholesome mental properties, saddhā is one of them. It is like mindfulness, moral shame and moral fear.

Saddhā as a good mental property, thus, has good influence on the mind. It enhances the mind to be pure and wholesome.

3. Genuine Saddhā and Non-Genuine Saddhā

There is no explanation of real faith and false faith in other systems. In Theravāda Buddhism, however, there are exact principles to distinguish real saddhā from unreal saddhā. According to Myanmar Theravada Buddhist, saddhā, which gives clarity, peace and tranquillity, happiness of mind for the devotees is genuine saddhā or reliable Saddhā. Among many objects of saddhā, the Three Gems are said to be the most reliable and convictional. By studying the true nature of the Three Gems or the attributes of the Three Gems, the Buddha, Dhamma and Samgha can be realized clearly.

There are the Nine Attributes of the Buddha, the Six Attributes of the Dhamma and the Nine Attributes of the Samgha which are described in Buddhist Scriptures. Whenever we pay respects to Buddha and concentrate on His nobility in our mind we fix on these exalted attributes.
The Noble Teaching of the Exalted Buddha is known as the Dhamma in the Three Gems. If we pay homage to it, we shall benefit in this life as well as in the next life. The devotees, who pay respects and homage to the attributes of The Sangha, will be protected from danger and harm and will gain all benefits in life. A devotee should pay homage to the Three Gems. It gives many benefits for the present life and the life after death. They also prevent and destroy suffering, danger and harm to devotees and eventually bring clarity and peace of mind of devotees.

Besides, there are other reliable and truth worthy things which have existed in our inner being. They are kamma and its results, meritorious deeds and the wholesome mental factors.

Kamma is a Pali term meaning action, (Volitional action). In the Teaching of the Buddha (Higher Level-Volume 1), the nature of Kamma is explained as follows. Cetana (Volition) is the main source of kamma. The word cetana is a special term in Buddhism, the definite meaning of which cannot be rendered into any other language. Cetana is the main cause of every action bodily or verbal or mental which may be good or bad. Nothing can be accomplished without cetana. Cetana is called the action or kamma by the Buddha. Thus we should believe in the theory of kamma as we believe in the Three Gems.

In Buddhist thought, the ten meritorious deeds bring all types of happiness and prosperity for devotees. These good deeds are:


The above ten good deeds are believed as reliable saddha. Among the fifty-two kinds of mental properties, the following are wholesome mental properties (or) mental factors.


These mental properties develop the mind to be pure and wholesome. Therefore we should put complete trust in our mental factors.
The above mental volitional actions (kamma) of good deeds and wholesome mental factors can be cultivated, exercised, tamed and controlled. They can be regarded as real or genuine saddhā in Myanmar Buddhist society.

On the other hand, saddhā which yields to more defilements, such as, greed, hatred, conceit etc, is regarded as not genuine saddhā. Such saddhā cannot give purity and peace of mind because it is mixed with mind-defiling factors or defilements. Ten kinds of defilements are as follows:


There are many doctrines, theories, isms, views, of politics, economics and sociology in the world, for example, Existentialism, Pragmatism, Realism, Materialism in philosophy, Capitalism, Marxism, Fascism, Socialism, etc. in politics. Each view may be right within the limitation of time and place for those who believe it. But it may be false or unsuitable for other groups in different situations and conditions. They are not absolute truths. They are mixed with and based on the above mentioned mental defilements, personal bias, prejudice, selfishness, and individual interests. They have no strength or power to give purity, clarity and peace of mind for a long time. They lead to confusion and doubt in the mind of human-beings. They are not reliable and believable. They cannot, therefore, be regarded as real saddhā in Myanmar Buddhist thought. In this way, real saddhā can be distinguished from non-real saddhā from the stand point of Theravāda Buddhism.

4. Virtue of Saddhā

Things, which are regarded to be precious in many ways, are counted as gems. According to Venerable Thitagu Sayadaw, there are three categories of gem or jewellery; in Myanmar Buddhist society.

1. The Three Gems, the Buddha, the Dhamma and the Samgha
2. The seven Gems
3. One’s Children, elephants and horses.

In the second category, there are seven kinds of precious gems:

Among these seven kinds of precious gems, saddhā is comparable with the precious ruby which has certain powers.

1. When a ruby is put in a water pot, it brings sediment to the surface.
2. It cleans the dust on the surface of water and
3. It has the power to cool hot water.

Like the power of the ruby, saddhā also has some attributes for the mental purity. Some of these attributes are:

1. Saddhā can calm rough defilements
2. Saddhā can clean the hindrances or obstructions in the way for the achievement of mental absorption, insight, knowledge and fruition. There are six kinds of hindrances:


The power of saddhā can remove worry, despair, anguish, grief, anxiety and confusion which originate in social affairs, political affairs and economic affairs in the daily life and bring mental peace and happiness.

In the story of Patasārā, Buddha delivered the sermon of heedfulness to Patasārā who grieved about her family’s ruin. Heedfulness is the mental process of mindfulness. It is synonymous with mindfulness and the most vital factor in achieving merit. Because of the belief in the Buddha and His sermon, Patasārā was released from her grief. She became a famous Bhikkhuni in the Buddhist sāsāna and ultimately a famous Arahant under the Buddha dispensation.

The above story obviously shows the benefit of the attribute of saddhā.

4. Four Kinds of Saddhā

There are four kinds of saddhā which are described in Buddhist scriptures. They are as follows:

1. Āgamasaddhā
2. Adhigamasaddhā
3. Okappanasaddhā
4. Pasadāsaddhā
Āgamasaddhā is a firm conviction which is arisen in a Bodhisatta from the time of aspiring to become a Buddha.

Adhigamsaddhā is also a firm conviction of the Ariyas.

Okappanasaddhā is an unshakable conviction in the Three Gems; The Gem of the Buddha, the Gem of the Dhamma and the Gem of the Samgha. Pasadāsaddhā is clearness of conviction in the Three Gems.

Āgamasaddhā does not concern the laity. It is a conviction only for the Bodhisattva. Such strong belief is started in the heart of Bodhisattva who has received preordainment to become a Buddha from one of the preceding Buddhas. He has an aspiration to be a Buddha.

Adhigamasaddhā is concerned with an Ariya (noble one) who has eradicated some or all of the defilements, such as, greed, hatred, conceit, etc. There are four kinds or stages of Ariya, the Sotāpana, the sakadagami, the anāgāmi and the Arahat. The sotāpana who having reached the first stage of path-knowledge will attain the Ultimate Goal (Nibbāna) after having seven rebirths at the most. The sakadagami who having reached the second stage of path-knowledge, will be reincarnated only once as a human being before attainment of the supreme Buddhist goal. The anāgāmi, who has attained the third stage of path-knowledge, will be reborn only in the Fine- material Sphere or the Non-material sphere before realizing Ultimate liberation. The Arahat can eliminate all defilements.

He is ready to attain the Nibbāna. According to Venerable Chan Mwayt Sayadaw Okkapanasaddhā is for those who believe firmly in the Three Gems. Such kind of saddhā is based on intelligence. On the basis of intelligence, they understood the life of Buddha, His doctrines, His disciples, inner nature of Buddha, physical marks of Buddha, the nine virtues of the Samgha. They also realized that the unique virtues of the Buddha, the six virtues of the Dhamma, the nine virtues of Samgha. They also realized that the unique virtues of the Buddha imply essence of mundane and super mundane possessed by Him.

If, on the basis of intelligence, a person understands the virtue or attributes of Buddha, his or her belief is regarded as belief with intelligence. So also, on the basis of intelligence if he understands the virtues of both Dhamma and Samgha, his saddhā is regarded as the saddhā or belief with intelligence. Such kind of saddhā is known as Okappanasaddhāi.
Pasādasaddhā, the last and fourth kind, is concerned with common people, or sentient beings. It is a sādhdā without intelligence, for he becomes a believer by simply hearing the voice or name of the Buddha, the Dhamma, the Samgha. Though he does not understand about the Three Gems, he immediately believes in them. Some men have such strong beliefs in their mind. They are not intellectuals, or wise men. Most of Buddhists have no knowledge of Buddha, no knowledge of his sermons, no knowledge of the ways of liberation, no knowledge of The Four Noble Truths, no knowledge of Dhamma, no knowledge of Samghā. But they pay respect to the Three Grms, offer flowers, candles and water to the Buddha, they go to pagoda and make pay obeisance to Buddha images. These are Pasādasaddhā. It is the lowest stage of sādhdā in Buddhism.

The inner being of those who offer water, light, food, umbrellas, robe and flowers with veneration to the Three Gems will attain clearness, peace and tranquility. This shows that The Three Gems are believable. That is, said to be the true belief or sādhdā.

5. The Saddhā and Buddhist Life

Saddhā is one of the greatest powers to overcome difficulties, troubles and suffering which man faces. Once, Alavaka, the god of ogres in the Buddhist literature asked the Buddha some questions: how to overcome the circle of rebirth and what the noblest character of human being are. The Buddha replied that it is sādhdā.

Saddhā plays a vital role in Theravāda Buddhist life. The following explain why sādhdā plays an indispensable role in Theravāda Buddhism.

1. Saddhā is one of the fourteen wholesome factors.

2. Saddhā is one of the attributes of a lay devotee in Buddhism. Without it he or she not is regarded as a good lay devotee.

3. Saddhā for a good Buddhist meditator is essential. It is also a basic need for all good aspirants.

4. Saddhā is one of the controlling factors of mind (Indriyas)

The word indriyas means the ruling or controlling of mind for the realization of Dhamma for the fruition of one’s goal.

5. Saddhā is the Strength of Dhamma (Bala)
Dhamma strength or bala means great power which can destroy and eradicate the opposition. Bala is also like the commander or general. It serves as trust in the Buddha Sāsana for Bhikkus and lay folk.

Conclusion

By studying the nature, the role and the utility of faith, saddhā, in Theravāda Buddhism, we can understand the essence and importance of it in our life.

In Theravāda Buddhism, the exact meaning and definition of saddhā, real saddhā, and unreal saddhā, the necessity of saddhā, the limitation of saddhā etc; are already described. Buddhist saddhāis totally devoid of any doubtful thing, any emotion, any imaginary thing, any unclear factors, any ambiguity and any supernaturalism. So it is said to be an objective and realistic view. It is open to challenge to all practical tests.

According to the principle of necessity, water is required for human being, salt is necessary for delicious curry and faith, saddhā, also is needed to overcome the oppositions, to attain the benefits of mundane and super mundane and to develop mental purity. But the principle of necessity and sufficiency saddhā alone is not sufficient for the completion of life. Other factors are also required in association.

For the benefits of the present and the future existence, however, it is necessary to build strong and unshakable faith in the Three Gems, Kamma and mental power in man.

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