

THE ETHICAL ROLE OF PEACE IN MYANMAR SOCIETY

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Abstract

This paper is to examine the crucial role of peace within Myanmar society. It addresses the question: "Why ethical norms are essential for establishing a peaceful society?" The research highlights that Myanmar currently faces numerous challenges, including terrorism, human rights violations, economic inequality, religious intolerance, social injustice, and oppression of vulnerable groups. To foster peace, it is imperative for citizens to uphold and practice ethical principles such as justice, unity, mutual trust, non-violence, duty, responsibility, and equality. The study employs descriptive and evaluative methods to achieve its objectives, offering insights into the concept of peace and practical approaches for its implementation in Myanmar society.

Keywords: Peace, The Ethical norms, Myanmar Society

Introduction

Throughout history, humanity has sought to comprehend the essence of existence and establish a moral code that upholds nobility and earns respect. To reveal the true nature of human beings, it is essential to first define the term "man" or "human being." By understanding the reality of life and the world, one can aspire to live a life that is virtuous, harmless, blameless, noble, peaceful, and pure. This entails nurturing positive qualities, engaging in good deeds, and aiding others selflessly. Conversely, failing to grasp the true nature of life and one's surroundings inhibits the ability to achieve personal and collective growth, peace, happiness, and success.

The concept of peace encompasses both positive and negative meanings, requiring an understanding of its various dimensions, including personal, social, national, international, and global aspects. Together, they complement each other in creating a comprehensive approach to peace.

Personal or mental peace pertains to inner harmony and tranquility, while social peace relates to justice and progress within a community. National peace signifies stability, progress, and freedom from civil disorder within a country. International peace refers to harmonious relations between nations, while global peace denotes peaceful coexistence among all entities.

In reality, peace is indivisible and needs to be established globally for lasting stability. The existence of peaceful societies is crucial for the survival of humanity as a whole. Thus, it's crucial to acknowledge both the negative dimension—the lack of violence—and the positive dimension—promoting harmony in every sphere—when pursuing true and lasting peace worldwide.

Inner tranquility reveals a state of unwavering calm and composure, which is attained through embracing virtues such as kindness, empathy, leniency, temperance, humility, pardon, non-aggression, and affection. Most of these virtues imply that "Peace involves transcending the self" or letting go of egotism. It means that even personal peace anticipates harmonious interpersonal relations. Nowadays, this personal peace is lacking, especially in countries influenced by industrial consumerist culture, because it's challenging to find mental peace in our fast-paced lives constantly affected by rapid socio-political and economic changes. In terms of

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societal harmony, no community can sustain lasting tranquility because of ongoing issues such as extremism, joblessness, intergroup and racial tensions, political disagreements, and more.

It is clear that Myanmar, like many other parts of the world, is facing a multitude of crises including issues related to terrorism, human rights violations, economic inequality, racial discrimination, religious intolerance, nationalism, social injustice, poverty, oppression of marginalized communities by the powerful and wealthy, ecological imbalance and natural calamities. The survival of humanity and related peace issues call for adherence to fundamental ethical principles that emphasize our freedom to choose between life and death. Additionally, it requires active participation in decision-making and policy formation while committing ourselves to human values and global peace.

In the modern era, people are surrounded by cruelty, torture, conflict, and violence, which are not natural conditions but rather afflictions that must be eradicated. Ethics teaches us that peace can be achieved by eliminating all forms of violence, such as wars, environmental destruction, human rights violations, abuse against women and children, and exploitation and oppression of the weak, poor, and illiterate.

All human beings share a yearning to live out their lives in peace, but they have reached the crossroads where peaceful living and the healthy future of civilization depend upon obeying ethical principles.

This study tries to prove that ethical norms are essential to observe and practice to establish a peaceful society. The conception of peace has a sound moral foundation based on some primary moral concepts such as self-realization, virtues, duty, non-violence, responsibility, mutual trust, security, unity, wisdom, and reflective thinking, and that is not only normative but also practical for the betterment of peace in Myanmar society.

Nature of Peace

In any case, peace has numerous other meanings beyond tranquility, including justice, good health, safety, well-being, prosperity, fairness, security, good fortune, and friendliness. Defining peace is not straightforward because, like most words, it carries personal connotations. Naturally, peace has many definitions: Peace is the typical, non-conflict state of a nation, group of nations, or the world. It is also an agreement or treaty between warring or opposing nations or groups to end conflict and refrain from further aggression.

Peace denotes a condition of shared accord among individuals or communities, particularly in interpersonal connections—for instance, making an effort to coexist amicably with those nearby. Additionally, peace means the usual absence of civil unrest and violence within a community, ensuring public order and safety. Finally, peace can refer to a mind free from irritation, distraction, anxiety, or obsession; a state of calmness and serenity.

Kinds of Peace: Positive and Negative Peace

Indeed, discussions about peace often utilize negative terms and newly coined words to convey the idea of peace, such as nonviolence, non-war, non-killing, and non-conflict. However, proponents of peace argue that it should be viewed as a fundamental concept linked to cooperation, harmony, and positive human relationships. They emphasize that understanding peace solely in negative terms is a misconception. In the realm of peace scholarship, there is an established emphasis on differentiating between positive peace and negative peace. The concept

of positive peace involves ensuring fairness and equal rights across a community. Meanwhile, negative peace focuses on the absence of violence or war but does not necessarily address underlying systemic issues or inequalities.

Peace is often found to be making distinctions between "positive peace" and "negative peace". Negative peace is characterized solely by the absence of warfare or violent confrontation. The calm during an armistice is a clear instance of negative peace. Meanwhile, positive peace involves more than just stopping violence—it includes ensuring justice for all individuals.

Positive Peace

Positive peace refers to the presence of conditions that foster harmony, justice, and sustainable development within societies. It goes beyond merely avoiding conflict, emphasizing the establishment of systems, attitudes, and institutions that promote equality, inclusivity, and resilience. This concept addresses the root causes of conflict and creates an environment where individuals and communities can thrive.

Positive peace, in essence, is about guaranteeing impartiality and equity for all individuals. It does not solely mean the absence of violence, but also emphasizes the presence of justice for everyone without discrimination. Positive peace represents a state where all forms of structural and direct violence are non-existent, and social justice is equally accessible to every individual in society. Furthermore, positive peace entails the fair distribution of power and resources, allowing individuals to realize their true potential without encountering resistance. It envisions a society free from discrimination, inequality, and violence; instead, built on principles of cooperation, harmony, tolerance, and respect.

It's important to recognize that positive peace doesn't signify the absence of conflict; rather, it acknowledges that conflict is inevitable but can be resolved through cooperative means and addressing legitimate grievances primarily through structural reforms. Thus, positive peace promotes cooperative efforts to achieve social prosperity.

Understanding positive peace through virtue ethics means seeing it as an ethical trait intertwined with kindness, forbearance, and generosity. It's crucial to understand that peace isn't simply about quietism or passive meditation; Jay McDaniel proposes the idea of "creative peace," emphasizing tension and activity as individuals and cultures engage in listening to one another while interacting constructively.

Negative Peace

Negative peace refers to the absence of direct violence, conflict, or war. It signifies a state where overt hostilities have ceased, but it does not address the underlying causes of conflict or promote long-term harmony. It is often seen as a temporary or surface-level form of peace. While direct violence may be absent, structural violence is still prevalent within negative peace. This type of peace takes a curative approach towards conflict or violence and may have been restored without peaceful means, often involving the use of force or coercion. In a society under negative peace, there is mutual mistrust among parties and it may also suggest that both sides are preparing for potential violence or war.

The Role of Ethical Norms for Peace

Ethics, or morality, is often perceived as a set of guidelines that differentiate between right and wrong actions. Alternatively, ethics can be defined as the study of behavioral norms,

explored through disciplines such as philosophy, theology, jurisprudence, psychology, and sociology. For instance, a medical ethicist examines and evaluates ethical standards within the healthcare field. Additionally, ethics can be viewed as a method or framework for decision-making and addressing complex issues. For example, when tackling a multifaceted problem like climate change, perspectives may vary, ranging from economic, environmental, and political to ethical. While an economist might focus on assessing the costs and benefits of climate policies, an environmental ethicist would examine the underlying moral principles and values.

Many professions, organizations, and disciplines follow behavioral guidelines designed to align with their specific objectives. These standards facilitate collaboration among members while fostering public confidence. For instance, ethical codes govern practices in medicine, law, engineering, and business. Similarly, research ethics serve to advance academic goals and provide oversight for researchers, academics, artists, and politicians. Over time, this has developed into an established field dedicated to examining these ethical systems.

Peace is often defined as the absence of aggression, violence, or hostility, viewed through the lenses of both positive and negative peace. Violence, as the extreme manifestation of aggression, encompasses harmful behaviors such as physical assaults, sexual violence, and lethal acts. Its origins can be traced to various factors, including frustration, exposure to violent media, domestic or community violence, and a predisposition to perceive others' actions as hostile, even when they are not.

Violence and other forms of abuse are often understood as patterns of behavior aimed at establishing and maintaining control over family members, household members, intimate partners, coworkers, or individuals and groups. In any form, violence and abuse have a profound impact on a person's health and well-being. The root causes of all violence are embedded in the many types of inequality that persist and worsen in society. Violence and abuse are tools used to establish and maintain power and control over others, often reflecting a power imbalance between the victim and the perpetrator.

To achieve peace in all aspects of life, people must educate themselves and others in the ideals of ethical conduct. Ultimately, it is humanity itself that stands as the greatest obstacle to peace, as the choices between war and peace, progress and decline, creation and destruction, are human decisions, not inevitable historical events. If people desire peace within their inner selves and at every level of society, they must embrace positive qualities or virtues such as love, kindness, self-discipline, sacrifice, humility, non-violence, forgiveness, tolerance, compassion, gentleness, and contentment. Merely knowing about virtues is not enough; embodying them is more important. These virtues should be evident in our thoughts, words, and actions.

At the same time, destructive traits or vices like anger, greed, arrogance, pride, excessive ego, betrayal, and intentional harm to others must be rejected. Cultivating noble qualities and eliminating harmful ones requires comprehensive moral training. Therefore, it is the responsibility of moralists, philosophers, religious thinkers, social reformers, and philanthropists to dedicate their lives to providing this kind of moral education.

Myanmar Cultural Society and the Peaceful Resolution

Myanmar boasts a rich cultural heritage and civilization that has flourished for centuries. The unifying force that has sustained Myanmar as a nation is Theravada Buddhism, which was

introduced during the reign of King Anawrahta of the Bagan Dynasty (1044–1077). Since then, Theravada Buddhism has thrived in Myanmar, serving not only as a religion but also as a fundamental way of life. Its moral teachings are deeply ingrained in the fabric of Myanmar's society, shaping interpersonal relationships, family and community structures, as well as artistic and cultural expressions.

Similar to other great global faiths, Buddhism promotes harmony and non-violence. "This principle finds clear expression in the *Dhammapada*, the Theravadin Buddhist scripture comprising 423 verses of practical wisdom. The fifth verse articulates:"

Hatred is never appeased by hatred in this world.

By non-hatred alone is hatred appeased.

This is an eternal law.¹

In Buddhist scripture, the Pali term *dhamma* denotes universal truth, encompassing the Buddha's doctrines. Therefore, this verse on non-hostility relates to a core principle of the Buddhist tradition, specifically peace and non-violence. For example, one finds in the *Lokaniti*, these verses regarding getting peace of life:

One should overcome one haughty by civility, one who is bad by goodness;
a niggardly person by liberality, one mendacious by veracity².

According to Buddhist philosophy, hostility and repulsion, much like craving and attachment, originate from delusion. That ignorance is people's mistaken notion of their own permanent, independent existence. In ignorance, one sees oneself as a separate being, unconnected with others. Blinded to one true state of interdependence and interconnectedness, it is this basic ignorance that keeps one divided. Only practice that leads to overcoming such ignorance will help to free one from the prisons he or she makes for himself or herself and others.

People all harbor prejudices of various sorts. There is no exception to this fact. Not one of them is completely freed of prejudicial attitudes. People don't like certain colors or sounds; they're annoyed by certain circumstances, behaviors, or styles of doing things. People are harsh critics, even of themselves. Preferences and aversions are accepted as a given. Indeed, the ability to discriminate is considered an essential part of what makes them human beings. Humanity, distinct from all other beings, holds the gift of judgment and choice. Autonomy and the ability to choose are regarded as basic rights. So, one might ask, what's the problem?

The issue emerges, as it so often does, when individual preferences crystallize into rigid dogmas, when tentative beliefs ossify into unyielding truths, and when judgments of oneself and others solidify into distorting lenses that alter all human interactions, shaping one's understanding of self, society, and the world at large. This descent into prejudice represents a particularly insidious form, one that perpetuates suffering and injustice for both the self and others. It manifests in fractured relationships, whether personal or communal, in discord over religious doctrines or territorial disputes, and in the subjugation of one group by another, depriving them of freedom. Such occurrences mark a departure from humanity's higher potential, diminishing the essence of what it means to embody the best qualities of human existence.

¹ Acharya Buddhārakkhita. (1985). *The Dhammapada: The Buddha's Path of Wisdom*. Kandy, Sri Lanka: Buddhist Publication Society. P.23.

² Thu Kha (2014). *Lokaniti*. Yangon: Thu Kha Sar Pae. P-212.

Prejudicial attitudes and behaviors are both experienced and perpetuated by humanity on a daily basis. For people to endure and thrive on this shared, fragile planet, it is essential to cultivate mutual appreciation and respect, recognizing each other's humanity and striving for peaceful coexistence. While the ideal solution may involve the global disarmament of nation-states, such a transformation can only begin once individuals have first disarmed their own hearts.

In reality, at people's innermost cores, they are all the same: they are human beings who wish to have happiness and to avoid suffering. Yet, out of ignorance, people go about seeking these goals blindly and without insight. People live their lives seemingly oblivious to their prejudices, even though they are right in front of their eyes. In short, People suffer because they embrace the mistaken notion of their separateness from one another.

The illusion of separateness actively hinders individuals from recognizing the origin of this misguided cycle. Buddhist teachings state that the moment the ideas of 'self' and 'ownership' emerge, so do the ideas of 'not-self' and 'not mine.' In other words, when we think in terms of 'us,' there is automatically a 'them.' Once the concepts of division, distinction, and otherness enter our minds, they continue to shape (both literally and metaphorically) all our future experiences, decisions, and perceptions. People see the world in terms of us vs. them, me vs. everyone else, mine vs. yours. People are immediately caught up in a world of mistaken, logically unfounded, and seemingly uncontrollable hatred and prejudice. These dualistic divisions happen with incredible speed and mostly go unnoticed.

The deeply ingrained nature of this false belief in separateness makes it seem unimaginable to even consider its end. Buddhists accept that by insight, ignorance is destroyed. Thus arises the pivotal inquiry: Is it possible to eradicate sectarian, tribal, and faith-based animosities and biases? The solution, while affirmative, requires confronting deeply ingrained and often subconscious patterns—a challenge of considerable complexity. But it is a task so urgently needed in her or his current situation that it is well worth undertaking.

The dismantling of hateful prejudices begins with the recognition that one does harbor them. Next, one must be willing to look at her or his particular prejudices with honesty and resolve. People need to know how and why they, as particular human beings, came to harbor the specific views they do and, through this understanding, to be willing now to replace them with more positive views and behaviors. Lastly, People need to know that they can indeed make a difference; that they can work together for positive change in their society and the world. Thus, with understanding and with practice comes a softening of their rigid views. Human beings' hearts can open and, ultimately, they can transform themselves into loving individuals and loving neighbors; in short, into human beings at her or his best.

One cannot simply decide to love one's neighbor. Nor are there too many of them comfortable with the notion of loving themselves. Both these injunctions call for methods to enable them to carry them out. Yet, for most of them, it is precisely such methods that are lacking. Throughout history, different religious and philosophical systems have tried to provide practical guidance. One of these traditions, Buddhism, seems to offer, in fact, numerous methods for personal transformation for anyone who wishes to tackle this most serious undertaking.

Hatred is an acquired behavior, and the essential challenge lies in unlearning it. Similarly, racism and racial profiling are behaviors that are taught and must be consciously dismantled. Divisions based on ethnicity and social class are also learned constructs. Genuine understanding arises from acknowledging the shared humanity that unites all individuals.

The cultivation of peace, kindness, and compassion in every interaction holds the potential to create a harmonious culture of peace. However, such a transformation cannot be achieved effortlessly. It requires unwavering commitment, perseverance, mutual collaboration, and consistent practice over time. Individuals possess the capacity to reshape their thoughts, alter their perspectives, and embody peace within themselves. In doing so, they contribute to the broader realization of peace in the world. Yet, there are those who channel their mental energy toward fostering hatred, prejudice, and division—be it through racism, sexism, or other forms of discord. When faced with the severity of the current state of affairs, those who seek change must embrace a resolute determination to counter such negativity and commit themselves to the labor required for peace to prevail.

The pursuit of inner tranquility through Buddhist practices, though an essential and foundational step, is but the beginning of a larger journey. True fulfillment lies not solely in personal serenity but in the active endeavor to extend and disseminate this peace outward. Such an undertaking demands further dedication, intentional effort, and transformative action.

Conclusion

Achieving sustainable peace requires adept diplomacy, collective and individual wisdom, and a steadfast dedication to nonviolence and the preservation of human dignity. The foundation of any peace and human rights movement must rest upon the principles of "justice and equality" for all individuals. Over six decades of armed conflict could finally conclude if political, social, and ethnic leaders, along with their communities, abandon their war-centric mentality and relinquish the antiquated notion of "victory." In the context of our nation, while war may secure battles, it has never succeeded in resolving the underlying conflicts.

Legal systems in most societies are designed to govern behavior, but ethical standards are typically broader and less formal than laws. While laws often enforce widely accepted moral values and share similarities with ethical principles, they are not identical. Legality does not always align with morality, and ethical actions can sometimes challenge unfair laws. Ethical ideas can also be used to evaluate, criticize, or suggest changes to laws. Throughout the past century, many social reformers have urged people to oppose laws they viewed as wrong or unjust. Peaceful civil disobedience has been a method for protesting such laws and expressing political views ethically.

There are several reasons why following ethical standards is crucial. First, norms promote the aims of social peace, such as knowledge, truth, and avoidance of error. For example, rules against fabricating, falsifying, or misrepresenting research data help uphold the truth and reduce mistakes.

Second, since often ethical concepts involve a great deal of cooperation and coordination among many different people in different disciplines and institutions, ethical standards promote the values that are essential to collaborative endeavors - including trust, accountability, mutual respect, and equitable treatment. For example, many ethical norms, such as guidelines for

authorship, copyright and patenting policies, data sharing policies, and confidentiality rules in peer review, are designed to protect intellectual property interests while encouraging collaboration. Most researchers wish to be recognized for their work and do not want their ideas to be stolen or revealed prematurely.

Third, ethical frameworks mandate researchers' transparency and responsibility to society at large. For instance, Regulations addressing misconduct, conflicts of interest, human subject safeguards, and ethical animal treatment serve a vital purpose: they enforce the social contract between publicly-funded researchers and the citizens they ultimately serve.

Fourth, Ethical norms generate the positive feedback loops where societal trust reinforces political peace, which in turn strengthens ethical behavior. People are more likely to support a research project when they can trust the quality and honesty of the work.

Finally, many of the norms promote a variety of other important moral and social values, such as social responsibility, human rights, animal welfare, compliance with the law, and public health and safety. Ethical lapses can significantly harm human and animal subjects, students, and the public. Thus, ethical norms are vital for maintaining social harmony.

The matters related to peaceful co-existence are not just the domain of politicians, national leaders, and social scientists, but concern everyone. Every citizen of this global community must recognize their responsibility. This requires adopting a fundamentally new way of thinking—holistic thinking. It is the role of philosophers and ethical thinkers to free people from their deep-seated superstitions, dogmas, and outdated, illogical, or irrational ways of thinking. We must reassess and re-evaluate the relevance of traditional political and national goals, such as patriotism and nationalism, as well as spiritual ideals like personal salvation and self-realization.

The current global landscape demands a thorough review and reconsideration of traditional ideas and values from a global perspective for all decision-makers—from voters to executives, from parents to national leaders, and from national entities to international organizations. The greatest duty of thinkers is to ensure that humanity remains the highest priority. Therefore, it is essential to awaken the conscience at personal, national, and even global levels. The foundations for lasting peace aren't found in diplomatic halls or philosophical treatises, but in the marketplace, the schoolyard, the kitchen table - wherever human hearts practice the radical act of truly seeing one another.

As globalization redefines state sovereignty, cultivating mutual trust between nations becomes not just preferable but necessary for effective governance. Psychology informs people that where divisibility prevails, human beings become isolated and victims of unhappiness and misery. This truth applies to nations as integral parts of the same global system.

For a society to achieve peace, it is essential for all citizens to uphold and practice ethical principles like justice, unity, mutual trust, non-violence, duty, responsibility, and equality. The notion of peace is grounded in a strong moral foundation that includes key values such as self-realization, virtues, duty, non-violence, mutual trust, security, unity, wisdom, and reflective thinking. These principles are not only theoretical but also serve as practical guidelines for fostering harmony and advancing peace within Myanmar society.

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