



LOVING-KINDNESS AND COMPASSION IN BUDDHISM AND MORAL EDUCATION FOR YOUNG ADULTS: A CASE STUDY IN VIETNAM*

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Abstract

The young play a vital role in the development of each country in the world, so moral education for this group of people has been attracted great interest. There is a fact that the young's ethics now show some negative points; hence, the study of Loving-kindness and Compassion in Buddhism has both theoretical and practical significance. This article is aimed to clearly present basic teachings about the Loving-kindness and Compassion in Buddhism and its implications into improving the ethical education for the young in Vietnam. The importance of ethical values in Buddhism to the full education for the young generation in modern society is also discussed.

Key words: Ethics, Buddhism, Loving-kindness and Compassion, Vietnamese young adults.

* This research is funded by Vietnam National University, Hanoi (VNU) under project number QG.17.61



1. Rationale

Throughout the history, since its emergence, Buddhism has introduced ethical values that have made significant contributions to the development of the whole country, contributing to building up a set of standard beliefs and moral values in Vietnam's traditional and modern societies. The Threefold Dharma Seals of Buddhism advocate that all things can change, and if one can overcome the ego with desires and greed, one will reach the state of ecstasy, purity and perfection. These teachings clearly reflect the purpose of Buddhism is to bring a better and more meaningful life for humans. Accordingly, the Buddha's teachings always show a deep love for people, guiding people to live with the goodness, and developing perfect human morality. They also advocate for building up a harmonious and flourishing society where people in the society are free from all sufferings and can live a life with full bliss. These great values in the Buddhist teachings have an important contribution to maintaining a set of human values in a civilized, progressive, and modern society. In this society where the individual self tends to be put as the highest priority, where money decides people's thoughts and actions, and where people are like participating in an endless race to compete one another for fame and benefits, Buddhist ethics show greater values. When it comes to the young adults in general, and Vietnamese young adults in particular, ethical values in Buddhism has been playing significant roles in developing their good qualities, including nurturing and promoting the *Loving-kindness* and *Compassion*, spreading love to every walk of life, fighting and freeing people from slavery, oppression and injustice; thereby, fully developing young adults's personal values and enhancing their roles to the whole society.

2. Main contents

2.1. Basic contents in the philosophy of Loving-kindness and Compassion in Buddhism

Loving-kindness and Compassion are two of the Four Immeasurables (Four Immeasurables: Loving-kindness, Compassion, Sympathetic Joy and Equanimity), reflecting the most basic ethical values in Buddhism. "Loving-kindness" in English means "metta" in Pali, and "maitri" in Sanskrit. Loving-kindness means loving people and bringing happiness to them; meanwhile, Compassion (karuna) means loving people, sharing their pains and sufferings, and wanting to save them from these sufferings. *Loving-kindness and Compassion* can simply be understood as "bringing



happiness and relieving sufferings”, as sacrificing oneself to bring happiness to everyone else for saving them from pains and sufferings. *Loving-kindness and Compassion* are immeasurable minds, which means the kindness is infinite, embracing all beings (sentient and insentient). However, within the scope of the study, we only focus on discussing basic teachings in Buddhism about *Loving-kindness and Compassion* in human beings. These teachings will be presented as follows:

Firstly, Buddhism holds that *Loving-kindness and Compassion* need to be extended to all beings, on the basis that all beings, including humans, are equal.

The nature of Buddhism expresses immense love, and completely non-ego to all beings. It is a love without borders, without discrimination, beyond the limits of races, classes and nations. In its philosophy, Buddhism advocates all beings, regardless of class, age, gender, and wealth, and without enemies or relatives, are equal. The Diamond Sutra says: “a good man, or good woman, who has resolved his heart on Anuttara samyak sambodhi should think thus: ‘*I should take all living beings across to extinction, yet when all living beings have been taken across to extinction, there actually is not a single living being who has been taken across to extinction.*’ And why? Subhuti, if a Bodhisattva has a mark of self, a mark of others, a mark of living beings, or a mark of a life, then he is not a Bodhisattva”. All beings here mean no distinction between men and women, good or evil, rich and poor, young and old, and even between humans and other species. The Buddha always opens his heart to all sentient beings, to the poor, to the oppressed, to the exploited, to the people who help the community, etc. even to those who have once resented him. According to Buddhism, if the spirit of “constant equality” is used as a standard to follow when behaving with fellow human beings and other species, there is no longer distinguishing between the evil and the good. This spirit is expressed not only in the teachings but also in the mind of the Buddha, who once renounced the glory and the royal life, and went out to find the ways for saving people from sufferings in life. Buddha said: “*All beings have Buddha nature*” or “*Buddha is who Buddha has been, and sentient beings are Buddhas will become.*” Buddha Shakyamuni is a pioneer in human history fighting for social freedom and justice, for equality between castes and classes and between people and people in ancient Indian society, a society that has harsh class distinctions, through the statement: “*There is no caste in the same blood stream, there is no caste in bitter tears, man was not born already with the golden necklace or tin-ca sign (noble sign of Brahmin lineage) on the forehead*” [2, p. 115]. Talking about Shakyamuni Buddha, President Ho Chi Minh - Vietnam's national hero,



famous cultural celebrity, leader, and thinker, once wrote: “*Shakyamuni Buddha is a noble person. He is the one who gave up all his wealth and fame to save sentient beings; that is, to save the poor laborers ... The purpose of Shakyamuni is helping people to have food, clothing, equality, freedom and a common world*” [6, p. 194]. For Ho Chi Minh, the Buddha was like a great cultural figure that has made great contributions to promoting the peace and progress and advancement for the mankind. Or, the author J. Nehru wrote about the human justice and equality in Buddhism in the book "Indian Discovery" as follows: "*The Buddha did not directly criticize class, but in his category, he denied it. And certainly, his whole attitudes and actions helped weaken the caste system*" [4, pp.190 -191].

In the philosophy of *Loving-kindness and Compassion*, Buddhism also states that all people are equal in terms of karmic retribution and their attainment; regardless of race, classes or social status, basing on their own karma to decide samsara; their opportunities and conditions for reaching the accomplishment are exactly the same. Thus, it can be seen that the advocacy of equality among sentient beings is a highlight in Buddhist teachings. However, this philosophy is still deeply ethical. In the Early Modern Period, with the bourgeois revolutions, the concept of equality was emphasized on its political significance, mainly in the relationship with the state and the law. Nowadays, in modern society, equality is seen in all aspects of socio-economic life. The equality in politics, economy, culture and society is considered as goals and a motivation for the full liberation and full development of the whole society.

Secondly, Buddhist *Loving-kindness and Compassion* express human tolerance and generosity.

In the Buddha's teachings, all things and phenomena arise, survive, grow, and disappear for a reason, and so do humans. Buddhism explains that humans and all living things are made up of physical and mental elements. Mental element is called Nama (Name) while material element is called Rupa (Form). On the one hand, man is made up of five factors (so-called five Aggregates). They are Form (material), Sensations (feelings), Perceptions (impression, imagination), Mental activities (will), and Consciousness. On the another hand, man is made up of six factors: geology (mineral), water (water), fire (heat), wind (wind and air), space, and consciousness. Thus, by these two classifications, man is a combination of many dynamic elements. The human ego is also created by Name and Form. However, these elements only converge temporarily in a space - or in



a period of time, then they dissipate, so there is nothing permanent, and there is no fixed and unchangeable self. In other words, according to Buddhist teachings, there is no eternal self and there is essentially no self. Therefore, people should not be led by greed or engrossed in chasing fame, for win or lost. Those who are engrossed in fighting for fame and gains, though they can temporarily succeed, but according to Buddhism, are living with ignorance, delusion, misery, and they need to have mercy. Therefore, *Loving-kindness and Compassion* need to bring human tolerance to everyone. Having mercy and tolerance is also a way for people to gradually improve themselves for the better. If one fully understands this truth, one will lead a life with unselfishness, loving-kindness, deep sympathy with the sufferings of others, seeing others' pains as his own, and then trying to find ways to ease their sufferings; sharing joys with others as it is his joy; giving things to everyone without any hesitation and without expectation to be repaid, and that is for no fame and gains. Thus, with the philosophy of *Loving-kindness and Compassion*, Buddhism is easily accessed by the masses and it makes an important contribution to community cohesion, and helps building a harmonious and flourishing society.

Thirdly, Loving-kindness and Compassion in Buddhism reflect that Buddhism shows people the way to escape from all sufferings and oppression in order to bring them a happy life

The idea of "liberating people from life sufferings" is the central and fundamental of Buddhism. This idea can be seen in the Four Noble Truths which are the Buddha's first sermons presented at Mragadeva garden, near Varanasi. The Four Noble Truths include:

Dukkha: the nature of suffering

Samudaya: The cause of suffering

Nirodha: The cessation of suffering

Magga: The path to the cessation of suffering

Buddhism considers human life to be miserable, and the cause of suffering is due to ignorance. Due to ignorance, people are controlled by with five desires (five things desire: weath, fame, , sexual thrist, sleep and food) and they lose their Buddha nature. If one lives with his Buddha nature, promoting inherent his Buddha nature, he will lead a peaceful and happy life. Therefore, Buddhism always advocates creating trust for people, encouraging them to make best of their life



to better the mind and improve virtues in order to reach cessation of sufferings. In the Buddhist Sutras, there is a note of the Buddha saying that however large the ocean is, it has only one taste of salt. This is also true for the Buddha's teachings, though his teachings are as vast as the ocean, but they have only one goal, which is to end suffering for people. Thus, *the idea of liberating people in this world from sufferings is the ultimate goal of Buddhism, which is also the most fundamental philosophy consistently expressed by Loving-kindness and Compassion in Buddhism.*

According to the Buddha, greed, hatred and delusion (three poisons, or trivi tra) are the cause of all sufferings, and the cause of death and rebirth (samsara). However, human beings can eliminate their greed, hatred, and delusion to reach the cessation of sufferings, to attain peace, purity, and absolute freedom, which means being enlightened in Nirvana. In Sanskrit, Nirvana means quietude, perfect purity, that is, the state of a soul that shows no greed, anger and delusion, or a completely liberated soul. Nirvana is a place that can be reached in this world, due to the serious practice giving people a special mental state of peace, tranquility, and quietude, etc. In the book "What the Buddha taught", Walpola wrote: "Nirvana is a logical, wonderful, and transcendent ... Nirvana must be realized by the inside enlightenment." [5, p. 101]. Thus, Buddhism is not the only religion which is concerned with the fate of suffering people. However, what makes Buddhism different from other religions is the cessation of suffering. That is the path of cultivating wisdom, breaking ignorance, and putting away all cause and effect to avoid samsara and karma. Buddhism sees humans as the starting point and the ultimate goal of Buddhism is bringing freedom and happiness to all human beings. However, Buddhism refers to selfish individual controlled by and enslaved to his aspirations, and whose Buddha nature is obscured by bad karma. Therefore, humans need to improve themselves to eliminate their ignorance, to say No to bad karma, to escape from life sufferings and to reach the Nirvana. That can only be the path in which one has to self-struggle, and no one can help. Buddhist teachings reflect humanity at belief in human's abilities, showing people the way to joys, happiness and liberation. However, it must keep in mind that liberation in Buddhism is not limited in the field of morality or in the path of moral cultivation but extended to the field of knowledge and wisdom. It is here that it does bring great progressive values.

Fourthly, Loving-kindness and Compassion in Buddhism is expressed in educating a human being with "Loving-kindness, Compassion, Sympathetic Joy, Equanimity, Non-ego, and Sympathy". On the basis of the "Four Noble Truths", the theory of "dependent-origination", the



theory of "impermanence", and the theory of "non-ego", etc., Buddhism has built up a philosophy of life, a way of life for humans, that is taking "sympathy" as his humans' life goals. According to the theory of Buddhist "dependent-origination", all things in this world, including humans, are created by conditions to work in harmony, which is called birth, when the karmic conditions disintegrate and disappear is called cessation. Both being born or ceasing are temporary processes. The moment of harmonic conditions is called birth, the the moment of unharmonic conditions is called cessation, and then this again goes with other conditions to form other things. Buddhism holds that everything in the universe is "impermanent", created by conditions. Regarding humans, Buddhism advocates the "non-ego" theory - there is no "ego". Therefore, humans should not run after any fame, wealth or status, but should have love for everyone. With the theory of "impermanence" and "non-ego", Buddhism wants to give its followers a philosophy of kindness and humanity. When fully realizing this philosophy, man will say No to a selfish life, but live in the spirit of "Loving-kindness, Compassion, Sympathetic Joy, Equanimity, Non-ego, and Sympathy"; do all the things that are useful to everyone but with no hesitation and no hope of repayment, for no benefit and no fame. Buddhism has guided people to cultivate some of their virtues of a true and kind love. That is, do not step on the happiness of others to build happiness for yourself; one must live in a righteous way, with his own strength and efforts; life is full of sufferings, so one should not cause more suffering to others but must treat everyone with love, and help to overcome all difficulties in life.

Thus, in terms of personality philosophy, Buddhism has originally in itself universal human values, in which *Loving-kindness and Compassion* that Buddhism has used to educate sentient beings is the most important. With new changes in modern life, the creative application of the strong points of Buddhist ethics in the education of good moral qualities for people, including the young, is extremely necessary. Because of its nature and its meaning, the philosophy of *Loving-kindness and Compassion* in Buddhism has been appreciated through ages, continuing to contribute to the education of good moral values, developing compassion and human love for today's Vietnamese young adults.

2.2. Application of *Loving-kindness and Compassion* philosophy in Buddhism into the ethical education for Vietnam's young adults



Based on the realization of the profound human values regarding the Compassionate and Loving kindness philosophy in Buddhism, the moral education for young people in Vietnam today is always given high interest and priority. It is shown that the activities of cultivating human love and compassion for young people which apply values in Buddhist ethics have brought about concrete results. The form and content of education relating to the above-mentioned moral philosophies have been step by step renovated, which focuses on discovering, appreciating good people and good deeds; promoting the activeness and self-discipline in self-study and self-education among the young. Along with activities held by the Vietnam's Ministry of Education and Training, activities and campaigns held by universities and colleges, by Vietnam Youth Union, and other political organizations such as Trade Union, Vietnamese Women's Union, the Young Business Association, the Young Intellectual Association in combination with the local Buddhist Sangha show an important role in cultivating love and compassion for the young. Revolutionary movements and projects launched by the Ho Chi Minh Communist Youth Union, such as: "Building and developing our Fatherland", "Youth and voluntary works", "Keeping the young's traditions - Forever 20 ", and the campaigns named "Vietnamese young adults learn and follow Uncle Ho's ideologies ", " "Vietnamese youth is moving under the light of the Party", "Youth and A Meaningful Life", etc. have brought great opportunities for for young people to self-train, develop and contribute to the society. The spirit of "Loving-kindness, Compassion, Equality, Non-ego, and Sympathy" by the Buddha has been transmitted to young people by many new methods such as theater and art. The Buddha's good moral values of love and compassion for people, about life skills and lifestyles, etc., have also been efficiently propagated through extracurricular activities, experiential activities among the young. As a result, young Vietnamese are given increasing favorable conditions to cultivate their loving-kindness and compassion, promoting the spirit of "loving other people like loving their own bodies" and "good leaves protect tattered ones". The majority of Vietnamese youngsters show active participation in their learning and work with the purpose of living a noble and humane life; they have community spirit and enthusiastic participation in collective activities, volunteer movements, charity works; they have high sense of responsibility for their own lives, for their families and for the whole society. A survey conducted by Vietnam's Youth Union with 787 students and young adults revealed that: 66.7% of the respondents understand their responsibilities in the context of industrialization and modernization; 81.6% are willing to participate in local volunteer activities; 57.7% state that young students today



are living a more practical and oriented life; 56.3% behave correctly, properly and appropriately [1, p. 32]. “When having been asked about the essential qualities that Vietnamese youth today need, 1,080 respondents(77.27%) chose sense of creativity while 47.11% chose hard work”[3, p. 197].

Along with positive results, the education of *Loving-kindness and Compassion* for Vietnamese young people stills shows some limitations. Many organizations and individuals do not have full and proper understanding and awareness about the importance of promoting the progressive values of Buddhist ethics in fostering human love for young people. In the context that Vietnam is having many great opportunities and challenges, it is necessary to appreciate and uphold the roles of the young generation. However, the implementation of the Party's guidelines, the State's policies and laws on ethical education for young people has not been timely and effective. Many goals and targets are not satisfactorily achieved. There is a fact that a group of young people are showing decline and depravity in political ideology, morality, and lifestyle; they have hesitation when facing difficulties or hardships, lead an indiscriminate life, and show indifference to the political and social situation of the country; they lack sense of responsibility for the community; they disregard for human values and traditional ethics, etc. Some young people appreciate and follow a selfish and self-fulfilling lifestyle; they, always regard absolute individual and group interests, rather than collectives' and communities'; they prefer to enjoying life to working and contributing to the society. The selfish and self-reliant lifestyle in a group of the young today is opposed to the traditional good moral values of the Vietnamese people, including the Buddhist moral values.

Stemming from the above-mentioned reality, more than ever, the education of the compassion and loving-kindness for the Vietnamese young people today on the basis of inheriting the Buddhist progressive values is a in very important and urgent task. This contributes to shaping new generation with good talents and qualities, serving the cause of national development. In the current situation, the application of progressive Buddhist philosophies, including the philosophy of *Loving-kindness and Compassion*, to improving the effectiveness of moral education for Vietnamese youngsters, requires a number of steps as follows:

First, to raise the consciousness about the role of Buddhist ethics, including the philosophy of *Loving-kindness and Compassion* in perfecting the human personality in young people



It can be seen that the Buddhist teachings consist of a lot of progressive values about educating human qualities. Moreover, Buddhism also has a profound influence on the cultural and spiritual life of the Vietnamese people, and it can easily touch people's deepest feelings and sensations and stay constant. However, in order for young people to foster their interests in and followings about the good teachings on the Buddha's *Loving-kindness and Compassion*, then raising their awareness of the doctrine of humanity and human roles, as Buddhism states, is of great importance. Accordingly, it is necessary to continue to make changes in the awareness of the good Buddhist values including *Loving-kindness and Compassion*, for the purpose of improving human personality, and developing a harmonious and flourishing society. This will contribute to raising the awareness of the people, including the young, in preserving and promoting good traditional values, including the Buddhist moral values. To do this, it is necessary for colleges and universities to focus on providing scientific knowledge about religious moral values, about the roles of religious ethics, including *Loving-kindness and Compassion* in Buddhism, towards developing better people and society through the learning courses or modules about social sciences and humanities. For out-of-school educational activities, raising young people's awareness of the positive role of Buddhist ethics should also be done through various channels, such as mass media, books and papers about religions, religious retreats for young people in temples. Besides, it is also necessary to create favorable conditions for the Buddhist institutions to organize practically cultural activities such as Buddha's Birthday, Ghost Festival, etc. to organize Buddhist cultural weeks so that the education of this religion can be spread to the whole society. At the same time, it is necessary to continue renewing the propaganda and education of State's ideologies and policies on religion in order to create a change in society's awareness of the cultural values, Buddhist moral values and the role of Buddhism in the social life. On the basis of proper consciousness, there will be positive methods to transform Buddhist ethical values into the ethical education for young people today.

Second, to develop a sense of high responsibility for the community, for families and and for surrounding people among the young

The highlight of the Buddhist philosophy of *Loving-kindness and Compassion* is the desire to successfully accomplish the cause of human liberation in order to bring freedom and happiness to people. Applying the advances of Buddhist ethics, every young man today needs to love and care for the lives of his family, his relatives, and those around him, sacrificing his own interests for



benefits of the whole community. One must continuously cultivate love and respect to his parents, grandparents and ancestors; one should have kindness, sympathy and sharing to all classes of people, to families of war invalids and martyrs; to the poor and disabled people. Some activities can be listed as caring for or visiting disadvantaged children in remote areas; donating for the flooded, drought-stricken people; taking part in charity activities suggested and held by the schools, and Youth unions, etc. Each young adult also needs to be strict and serious in cultivating his generosity with friends and co-workers. In any circumstance, it is necessary for them to make good efforts to fulfill their duties, fulfill their citizens' responsibilities, helping the country to eliminate poverty and backwardness to catch up with other countries in the region and in the world. Besides, Vietnam's young people today should study hard to understand moral values, and behave appropriately in all social affairs such as respecting the old, loving the children, respecting teachers, and treating others friendly and nicely. In addition, young people need to have a deep awareness of their own values and their responsibilities to the whole society; to the country, to the people and are ready to contribute to the development of the homeland; always know how to overcome obstacles and difficulties to complete his duties well.

Third, to develop kindness and compassion among young people

In today's society, in order to effectively apply the Buddhist philosophy of Loving-kindness and compassion, every young adult needs to uphold the loving, compassionate and respectful lifestyle. This is a very important quality of young people, helping them to live harmoniously and cordially in the community, thereby raising awareness for the collectives, for the common good of the people, and the country; and eliminating individualism and selfishness. Young people now need to be kind and generous to others, ready to forgive mistakes and respect others' personal values. The tolerance and affection can be shown in friendship, partnership and other relationships in everyday life. Specifically, in daily life, every young person should show the appreciation for the good, and disagreement to the evil to uphold human values. Young people need to have faith in the public, in the good virtues, even in those who once used to be social evils. These people also need to have emotional care to return to the community and to improve themselves to become useful citizens. Compassion and kindness also means really loving, caring, and helping others for no returns, which is from the human unselfishness and tolerance. Compassion and kindness must start from respecting each other's values, caring and helping others sincerely to overcome all difficulties in life; being sympathetic and generous with each other's faults; sincerely advising each



other to help correct the defects; being honest, and taking care of one another, showing politeness and respect in both big and small duties, from words to actions. In addition, young people also need to know how to condemn the indifference to the others' sufferings and misfortunes, and to bravely fight on evils.

Fourth, to raise the spirit of fighting for human happiness, for the cause of national construction and development among the young

"Human values" is the starting point and final goal in the philosophy of *Loving-kindness and Compassion* in Buddhism. To apply the Buddhist ethical philosophy to developing good moral values, Vietnamese youth now need to study and promote their roles as the key generation of the country in eliminating poverty and social evils, helping develop the country further. In social activities, every young adult needs to show his activeness and self-awareness like expressed in the slogan "Youths are present wherever they are needed, wherever there are difficulties to cope with." Whatever the field is and whatever the situation is, young people should be the pioneers, wholeheartedly dedicated to serving the community. The active participation in community organizations organized by the Youth Union, the Youth Union, and the Buddhist Sangha is also a good way to develop the kindness, compassion and the spirit of fighting for people's happiness. , such as: Youth volunteering campaigns, charitable activities, like donating for the flooded, visiting orphanages and nursing centres, etc. Besides, schools, and Youth unions also need to create a favorable environment for young people to have different real-life experiences so that they can be trained and challenged outside schools and work-places. Taking part in social activities, young adults can raise their awareness of their duties as a citizen and a member of society in the revolutionary cause of building and developing the country with greater strenghts, democracy, justice and civilization.

3. Conclusion

Thus, cultivating and educating Buddhist *Loving-kindness and Compassion* is ground for young people to perfect themselves. Although the seeds of compassion and kindness are available inside each person, they do not naturally appear. They are developed from each individual's learning, cultivation and self-improvement through practical activities and the education in the institutions, organizations, communities, families and the whole society. Therefore, in order to



preserve and promote the good traditional values about the kindness and compassion, including Buddhist ethics, young people throughout the country must constantly learn and take a great deal of effort. For every young adult, the creative application of the Buddhist philosophy of *Loving-kindness and Compassion* is a great way to improve their personal values, reaching common values of Truthfulness, Goodness, and Beautifulness, which mean achieving the cultural values and standards, gradually forming a sustainable and fully developed society.

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