
UNDERSTANDING MEHM TIN MON'S INTERPRETATION OF *ALOBHA* (NON-GREED) AND THE PRACTICE OF GENEROSITY

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ABSTRACT

A great scholar of the Abhidhamma in Myanmar, Mehm Tin Mon interpreted *alobha* as a mental state. He considered non-attachment to sense-objects and greedlessness as the chief characteristics of *alobha*. To put *alobha* into practice he recommended generosity, morality called abstinence from sensual objects and non-covetousness, meditation called tranquility meditation and insight meditation. They are generally practices to reduce and remove greed. He explains how to practice these techniques in connection with contemporary social development. Yet his interpretations of the stages of Buddhist social development are respectively criticized by some Buddhists scholars. This paper intends to provide an understanding of his interpretations of *alobha* and its relevance for the contemporary times.

Keywords: Alobha, Non-Attachment, Generosity, Buddhism.

Mehm Tin Mon is a famous interpreter of Abhidhamma in Myanmar. His various books and interpretations are an attempt to make Abhidhamma and Buddhist doctrine more understandable and more easy to practice for

people living in contemporary society. In his work *The Essence of Buddha Abhidamma*, he explains the stages of Buddhist social development: he generosity stage, the morality stage and the meditation stage. He gives priority to the practice of generosity to achieve non-attachment or *alobha*. He interpreted *alobha* as “non-attachment, greedlessness, generosity”.¹ And he claimed that, “non-attachment to sense-objects and greedlessness is the chief characteristic of *alobha*”.² *Alobha* is non-attachment or greedlessness. They are different from each other in words, but their main characteristic of not adhering to sensuous objects. Both of them lead to the same target according Theravada Buddhist doctrines.

But his main contribution here is the important place which he gives to generosity. He goes on to claims that: “Generosity is *alobha*”. Traditionally in Theravada Buddhism, generosity is considered only a practice. But Mehm Tin Mon teaches us that the practice of generosity is central to the realization of *alobha*. He writes: “*alobha* manifests itself in the form of generosity”.³ And furthermore: “Non-attachment and greedlessness are the meanings of *alobha*, and generosity is its practice. This is the meaning and practice of *alobha*”.⁴

In his writings he analyses in detail the three stages of Buddhist social development: the generosity stage, the morality stage and the meditation stage. But for the purpose of this paper, we can focus on his interpretation of generosity to understand the general tendencies of his interpretation of Abhidhama, and his prioritizing of generosity, and to understand some possible criticisms.

Generosity and Its Nature

Regarding generosity and its nature, he writes that:

Alobha is opposed to *lobha*. The nature pursuing possessions against generosity, is *lobha*. The nature being stingy with one’s possessions against it, is *macchhariya*. If eliminating such *lobha* and *macchhariya* in non-greed (*alobha*), one can offer successfully.

Lobha is greed and *macchhariya* is stinginess. Both of them are obstacles to the realization of *alobha*. These obstacles can be overcome through generosity. In Theravada Buddhism generosity is not given a chance to succeed because it is blocked by greed and stinginess. Eliminating them, allows the birth of *alobha*, and one's generosity can be developed.

So, with regard to previously mentioned facts, it can be presumed that his interpretation effectively highlights “No *alobha*, no *dāna*. No non-greed, no generosity.” This is the understanding of generosity in traditional Theravada Buddhism. But we will see how Mehm Tin Mon reverses this to claim that it is the practice of generosity itself with a view to its results can lead to *alobha*. This reversal is for the purposes of understanding Buddhist social development and to understand how *alobha* can be achieved in contemporary society.

The Generosity Stage in Buddhist Social Development

Regarding generosity, Mehm Tin Mon taught that generosity is the icon of loving-kindness, it involves loving-kindness in both bodily action and verbal action, and it causes donors and receivers to harmonize with each other.⁶

Loving-kindness brings people together and eradicates hate, producing more love and harmony to society. Without it, greed would overpower society. Likewise, Taedaw Sayadaw taught that: “Generosity produces not only good results of liberation (*nibbāna*) and future lives but also good results of present life”.⁷

It also leads to liberation. So, the practice of generosity in relation to *alobha*. is understood with reference to its results. This consists in present results and future results.

Regarding the simplicity of such generosity, Aye Naing writes:

Generosity is easier to be observed by Buddhists than morality, concentration or wisdom. There is no need to restrict bodily actions or speech like morality. No one

needs to control one's mind as in meditation to achieve concentration or wisdom. As long as there is a recipient, a donation and one's volition, the merit of one's generosity can be accomplished.

Generosity is easily practiced in Theravada Buddhism. It requires little knowledge of doctrine and little discipline. Everyone can do it. Even an animal can observe it. At the time of Gotama Buddha, it is said that the elephant Pāḷileyaka helped the Buddha by observing it. So Mehm Tin Mon's interpretation is accurate concerning his understanding the importance of generosity.

Knowing the Results of Generosity

Generosity involves good deeds directed to the welfare of others. But sometimes it leads to results and sometimes they do not. The Buddha taught: Even a good person may still meet with suffering so long as his good deeds do not bear fruit: but when they do bear fruit he will enjoy the benefits of his good deeds.¹⁰

Following this idea, the position of Mehm Tin Mon suggests that we need to know the results of our good deeds. If you do not know the results, you cannot attain its benefits.¹¹ For instance, donors who observe generosity every day and do not know the effects of their generosity cannot attain good results. In the same way, thieves who steal the property of others and do not know the consequences of their crime, cannot reform themselves.

This is one weakness of Mehm Tin Mon's interpretation. The Buddha did not teach one should know the result of one's generosity. It is enough to know that the good deeds will attain their results over time. In the tradition of Theravada Buddhism, the Buddha taught volition (*cetanā*) is called "action (*kamma*)".¹² Therefore, acting rightly is more important than knowing the results of one's right actions.

Ven. Sri Dhammananda from Sri Lanka claimed: "Great people always regard their body of flesh and blood as useful just for the world's

good and welfare”. According to him, in the various Jataka stories associated with Theravada Buddhism, many of the future Buddhas (*Bodhisattā*) sacrificed their life for happiness of the beings. The generosity of their self-sacrifice is done as a matter of principle. To a great man, his principles are far more important than his money or life. Such people are rare, that is why we regard them as great people. Truly great people have one thing in common, that is, they use their resources: wisdom, sympathy, power, energy and knowledge of the good for the benefit of mankind. According to Mehm Tin Mon, this is called ‘The Greatest Perfection of Generosity (*Dānapamatthapāramī*)’ in Theravada Buddhism.

In this regard, Albert Schweitzer, the Nobel Prize winner, said: “The only ones among you who will be truly happy are those who have sought and found how to serve”. Great minds seek how to serve to create happiness without any expectations or attachments. The more they dedicate themselves to service, the more their actions bring about good results.

Extreme Generosity

But why focus on generosity in light of its results? This is because in contemporary times not everyone can aspire to be a great man and give themselves in self-sacrifice. Common people often wonder if Buddhist teachings can be applied to life in materialist society. This gives importance to generosity and how it can be practiced. Mehm Tin Mon stated that there are ten kinds of generosity (that cause one to be born in woeful states) by referring to *Milindapañhā Pāḷi*:

What are ten kinds of generosity? Venerable Nāgasena!
There is a drink-generosity. In this world, it should not be called ‘generosity’ because one observes it, one can be born in woeful states. Generosity of a theatrical display, woman-generosity, bull-generosity, painting-generosity, weapon generosity, poison, leg-iron-generosity, fowl-pig-generosity, generosity of false weighing and false measure.

For instance, in the Vessantara Jataka, King Vesantara practiced

an extreme form of generosity by offering his own wife and children. Yet he did not urge others to observe such generosity. Nowadays we would consider his actions criminal.

In the Jataka stories recounting the previous lives of the Buddha, all of the future-Buddhas (*Bodhisatta*) had to observe extreme generosity practices. They would offer all their possessions, their children, wife, parts of their body, and finally their life to attain the enlightenment and the Buddhahood.¹⁶ The principle seems to be: “The more I give, the more merit I will receive. No pain, no gain. I have to observe these acts step by step to attain an enlightenment”.

Yet King Vessantara believed himself absolved for his extreme generosity. He believed his grandfather would recover the children he gave away to Brāhmaṇa Jūjaka.¹⁷ Also, before offering his children to him, he himself instructed his son Jālī to inform their grandfather in the palace to recover them. For these reasons, it can be presumed that King Vessantara cannot be blamed for such extreme generosity.

In the Jataka stories, the future Buddha had to observe such extreme generosity to attain enlightenment. But when he became the Lord Buddha, he prohibited the practice of such extreme generosity. He laid down training rules for the Buddhist monks not to receive bulls, slaves, and woman from donors.

This is why Mehm Tin Mon guarded against such extreme generosity did not urge other to observe them. A moral practitioner should not observe such practices in the modern age. One should know the results of one’s generosity because practicing generosity according to mere principle alone can lead to extremes. So, this interpretation is also one of the strengths of his interpretation of generosity.

Generosity in Relation to Other Practices.

Mehm Tin Mon saw generosity in relation to higher Buddhist social practices. Here again he gives priority to generosity in relation to higher practices since it both contains and anticipates these higher states.

Generosity is a work to suppress greed attaching to the outside properties by offering them. Liberation, called *nibbāna*, is to also give up internal material and immaterial aggregates. If such outside properties are not able to be given away, such internal aggregates to which one attaches deeply, cannot be given up absolutely. Due to the help of generosity, insight meditation can be accomplished successfully. If generosity consists of the nature of insight meditation, this meditation also contains the nature of generosity. In the same way, the generosity incorporates the nature of the morality and the morality also involves the nature of the generosity.²⁰

He will even go on to say that, “Generosity, morality and meditation should not be distinguished. If they are united, they can produce a power.”²¹

So generosity goes beyond the mere act of donation and supports morality and meditation. Abstaining from killing any living beings is called ‘generosity of life’ due to its own function of offering life and happiness to others. Abstaining from stealing, committing sexual misconduct, telling lies and consuming intoxicating drinks and drugs is related to the basic practice of generosity. On account of helping others to be free from dangers, they can be called ‘generosity of non-danger’. This is the power of generosity respecting the functions of morality.

Generosity also supports meditation, it is found that generosity functions in promoting right speech, right action and right livelihood of the eight-fold noble path that corresponds with the meditation practices to be observed to attain peace. This is the power of generosity respecting functions of meditation. In this way, one’s all of the practices are working their main functions as well as other sub-functions for a successfully united whole.

Conclusion

In respect to generosity in Theravada Buddhism, the Gotama Buddha did not believe that generosity alone cannot accomplish attaining liberation. In the same way, he did not teach that generosity can accomplish all things within worldly and otherworldly realms. But it is found that there is a concept that a Buddhist moral practitioner of a future Buddha (Buddha-to-be) has to first observe the perfection of generosity (*dānapāramī*) to attain liberation and save all beings.⁷⁷ It is first step but it does not directly accomplish attaining liberation.

But in his reinterpretation of generosity for the contemporary age, Mehm Tin Mon taught that “generosity can accomplish all results of worldly and otherworldly realms.”⁷⁸

Actually, in Theravada Buddhism, there are distinctions. Generosity has the power to distribute goods, morality is able to foster health, tranquility meditation can create will-power. All of them remain in the worldly realm. But only insight meditation can accomplish wisdom of the otherworldly realm. It is in this realm where real liberation is attained. Generosity remains at the lowest level. It has no any power to accomplish all results. While it is understandable that Mehm Tin Mon wishes to interpret *alobha* through generosity for the common man in contemporary society, his prioritizing of generosity as *alobha* is inaccurate according to the traditional teachings of Theravada Buddhism. This is one of shortcomings of his interpretation.

In terms of social development, generosity is important. Offering food, clothes, and money, helps other persons. Also sharing knowledge to others can help them. It produces cheerfulness for oneself and others. Promoting cheerfulness also supports social development in the individual and the community. So, it can be agreed that it is an essential stage of the Buddhist social development. Yet generosity is only one stage in Buddhist social development. It need to be followed by morality practices and insight meditation.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ Mehm Tin Mon. *The Essence of Buddha Abhidhamma*. (Yangon: Myat Mon Yadanar Publication, 1995), 84.
- ² Ibid., 88.
- ³ Ibid., 88.
- ⁴ Ibid., 88.
- ⁵ Ibid., 145.
- ⁶ Ibid., 41.
- ⁷ Taedaw Sayadaw. *Mag Huthi (The Path)*. (Burmese Script). (Yangon: Dhammabyuhar Thuzar Myint Press, 2005), 57.
- ⁸ U Aye Naing. *The Buddhist Status*. (Burmese Script). (Yangon: San La Thaw Dar, 2010), 90.
- ⁹ Chaṭṭha-Saṅgīti-Piṭaka. *Abhidhammattha-saṅgaha and Abhidhammattha-vibhāvinī-ṭīkā*. (Burmese Script). (Yangon: Religious Affairs, 2010), 38.
- ¹⁰ Daw Mya Tin. *Dhammapada*, 44.
- ¹¹ Mehm Tin Mon. *Myat*, 7.
- ¹² R. Morris. (ed.). *Āṅguttaranikāya*. Vol. II. (Oxford: Pāli Text Society, 1995), 416.
- ¹³ K. Sri Dhammananda. *How to live without Fear and Worry*. (Malaysia: MBS Publications, 1989), 173.
- ¹⁴ Ibid., 174.
- ¹⁵ Chaṭṭha-Saṅgīti-Piṭaka. *Milindapañha*. (Burmese Script). (Yangon: Religious Affairs, 2010), 270.
- ¹⁶ Chaṭṭha-Saṅgīti-Piṭaka. *Jātaka-atthākathā*. Vol VII. (Burmese Script). (Yangon: Religious Affairs, 2010), 553.
- ¹⁷ Chaṭṭha-Saṅgīti-Piṭaka. *Milindapañha*, 273.
- ¹⁸ Ibid., 275.
- ¹⁹ H. Oldenberg. (ed.). *Suttavibhaṅga*. Vol I. (Oxford: Pāli Text Society. 1993), 150.
- ²⁰ Mehm Tin Mon. *Essence*, 146.
- ²¹ Ibid., 147.

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