

The Important Role of Wisdom (*Paññā*) in *Vidhura Jātaka*

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Abstract

This paper will attempt to solve the problem “In what way the *Vidhura Jātaka* shows that knowledge is an important factor for morality?” Solution to the problem will be that, knowledge and wisdom eliminate ignorance and delusion which lead living beings to unwholesome behavior. This paper will contribute to the realization that knowledge is necessary not only for the sake of knowledge but also for living a good life.

Keywords: *Vidhura Jātaka*, Wisdom, Living a good life

Introduction

Human beings are always doing and choosing to seek the good rather than the bad. We are the cause of our own choices and are therefore responsible for the act chosen. We as humans will regulate our lives in accordance with judgments and apply these judgments not only to our own conduct but to the conduct of others.

Ethics is concerned with rules of moral conduct as well as with values and criteria to differentiate between good and bad, right and wrong and is therefore a systematic study of morals. The aim of ethics is to determine the moral aspect of human behavior showing what is worth striving for, what behavior is good, what gives meaning to life. Thus, Ethics is the study or discipline which concerns itself with the moral aspect of human behavior.

Ethics is the study or discipline which concerns itself with judgments of approval and disapproval, judgments as to the rightness and wrongness, goodness or badness, virtue or vice, desirability or wisdom of actions, dispositions, ends, or states of affairs. Ethical judgments are value judgments which concern with the sense of ought and sense of should for the goodness of humanity. Ethics thus searches for the fundamental principles which define morality. Morality means rules or guidelines of behaviors based on what is considered ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ as well as that which ‘ought’ to be done or which ‘ought not’ to be done and is related to moral obligation, etc. Human societies generally have a set of rules as to how members of a society should conduct themselves for the welfare of society as a whole.

Many great thinkers have emphasized knowledge as the primary factor in ethics. Moral rules, even though based on divergent ethical principles, such as teleology and deontology are ultimately based on knowledge. And moral conduct according to Myanmar ethical view is based on both good will and good results. So the purpose of this paper is to show that Myanmar ethical views based on *Theravāda* Buddhist philosophy have been propounded unifying ethical principles in the *Vidhura Jātaka*. A study of these ethical views in this *Jātaka* will show they strike a balance between formalism and teleology or to put it in contemporary terms between consequentialism and non-consequentialism.

In the Myanmar way of thinking both criteria are necessary for proper moral conduct whether individual or social. Each person or individual is a member of a social group or society, so it is necessary that each person conducts himself morally for the good society.

Deontology and Teleology

In western philosophy, there have been different theories as to the basic principles that determine ethical conduct. Among them, Deontology (Formalism) and Teleology are concerned with moral concepts that are important in the history of Western ethics. The term 'deontology' is from the Greek word 'deon' which means duty. So these theories of morality are based on the principle of obligation. Deontological theories maintain that whether an action is right or wrong is for the most part independent of whether its consequences are good or bad. They are sometimes called non-consequentialist theories because they do not take into account the consequences that might follow from actions. Actions are to be judged solely on whether they are right and people solely on whether they are good, based on some other standard or standards of morality. That is, acts or people are to be judged as moral or immoral regardless of the consequences of actions.

On the other hand, the term 'teleology' comes from the Greek word 'telos' which means end. According to this the end result of the action is the sole determining factor of its morality. Therefore teleological theories are sometime called consequentialist ethical theories. These ethical theories maintain that whether an action is right or wrong is determined by whether its consequences are good or bad. It means that correct moral conduct is determined solely by the beneficial results of an action. It is the criterion by which an action is judged to be right if it maximizes what is desirable in its outcome, in comparison to alternative courses of action. So this is a comparative study of the Myanmar ethical views based on the *Vidhura Jātaka* and Western ethical views.

There are four kinds of moral action.

- (1) An act must be done out of good will, and then the action may result in good consequences.
- (2) Although an act may be done out of good will it may result in evil consequences.
- (3) Although an act is done out of evil will it may lead to good consequences.
- (4) An act is done out of evil will, and then the action results in evil consequences.

In the above four kinds, the first and the fourth kinds raise no ethical doubts but the second and the third kinds can be debated and has been argued about in Western philosophy. Thus the teleological view of ethics emerged for it is chiefly concerned with the consequences of any action. The deontological view of ethics is chiefly concerned with the non-consequences or motives of any action and concerns the second kind of action. So the purpose of this paper is to show that Myanmar ethical views based on *Theravada* Buddhist philosophy have been propounded unifying these two ethical principles in the *Vidhura Jātaka*.

The Jātaka Stories

The *Jātaka* stories which are the birth stories of *Gautama Buddha* occupy a position of influence and importance in Myanmar culture, for they have influenced and determined Myanmar ethical and social values. These *Jātaka* stories which are said to number approximately 550 are familiar to almost every Myanmar Buddhist children and the last ten stories of the Buddha's previous births before attaining Enlightenment have provided moral and ethical guidelines of great importance for Myanmar ethical thought.

Vidhura Jātaka is well known in Myanmar *Theravāda* Buddhism which gives an account of the wisdom and learning of the minister *Vidhura*. At the same time there are important ethical implications a study of which will show that Buddhist ethics is a synthesis

of deontological and teleological ethics. Firstly it would be necessary to explain the role of the *Jātakas* in Buddhist thought.

Gautama Buddha, the founder of Buddhism, was born in Nepal in the 6th century B.C. His personal name was **Siddhattha**. When He attained enlightenment and realized the Truth under the **Bodhi** Tree at **Buddhagayā** in India, He became Buddha which means the Awakened or the Enlightened One. While he was a **bodhisatta**, He had to practice self-development and transcendental virtues (**pāramī**) to achieve moral perfection and attain enlightenment. The **Jātaka** stories are concerned with the previous existences of the Buddha and are more or less accounts of how the Buddha to be tried to develop moral purity.

Buddha practiced the ten perfections (ten **pāramī**) to be free from suffering in the cycles of birth and to attain to the highest level in ethical, intellectual and spiritual achievement. **Bhaddanta vicittasārābhivamsa** stated in "**The Great Chronicle of Buddhas**"

" The Pali word Pāramī is the combination of parama and ī. Parama means " supreme" and is used here as a designation of Bodhisattas, because they are the highest of beings endowed with the extraordinary virtues of dāna, sīla, etc."¹

There are ten Perfections (**Pāramīs**); (1) Generosity, giving (**dāna**) (2) Morality (**sīla**) (3) Renunciation (**nekkhamma**) (4) Wisdom (**Paññā**) (5) Energy (**virīya**) (6) Patience (**Khanti**) (7) Truthfulness (**sacca**) (8) Determination (**adhitthāna**) (9) Loving- kindness (**mettā**) (10) Equanimity (**upekkhā**). There was a long history of previous births of Buddha. Many of the **Jātaka** stories show us how He worked hard by sacrificing His life in many lifetimes practicing these ten perfections or virtues. Thus **Jātaka** stories provide moral lessons which lead to the better life for the individual and society.

The Ethics of *Vidhura Jātaka*

Vidhura Jātaka is of great significance to show the fulfillment of wisdom (**Paññā Pāramī**). This is summarized as follows: At one time, there was a king who was named **Dhanañjaya-Korabba**. He lived in the **Kuru Kingdom** in the city of **Indapatta**. He had a minister **Vidhurapandita** who was very wise. One day, **King Dhanañjya** who was observing the eight Buddhist precepts, went to the royal park to meditate. The Brahma king **Suppanas**, the dragon king **Nāga** and king of the celestial abode **Sakka** who were observing the eight precepts were also present. These four kings meditated together and later met at the royal lake in the garden where they greeted each other.

They raised a question as to who was the most virtuous of the four kings? Each king replied, " my virtue is the most supreme." Then they said to **King Dhanañjya**, "Do you not have a very wise minister in your kingdom who could decide who is the most virtuous?" to which he replied; "Yes, O Kings, I have a wise minister named **Vidhurapandita**, and he will be able to give the right answer."

Vidhurepandita after listening to the reasons given by each concerning their moral character answered that all four kings were of equal virtue. When the four heard his answer, they were well pleased, so **Vidhura** was awarded a prize by each of the four kings. It so happened that the **Nāga king** had a queen named **Vimalā**. When she saw that the jewelled ornament on his neck was missing, she asked him where it was. The **Nāga queen**, after hearing her husband describe the incomparable sage, longed to hear him speak. But she thought, if I tell the king that I long to hear **Vidhura** discourse on the law, and ask to see him here, he will not bring him to me. So she pretended to be sick and took to her bed. When the **Nāga king** asked what ailed her, the **Nāga queen** told him she desired **Vidhura's** heart and added with guile that if she did not obtain **Vidhura's** heart, she would die. The king wished to

save the life of his queen, and his daughter, princess *Irانداتي* to help him resolved to send out a message seeking a husband who could bring her the heart of *Vidhura*. She went off to the Himalayas to gather fragrant flowers of all colors. Then she began to dance singing seductively, at that time a *yakkha* or demon named *Punnaka* heard *Irانداتي's* song, and he said "O lady, I can bring you *Vidhura's* heart so do not anxious about it."

King Dhanañjya was interested in playing dice. *Punnaka* made up his mind to win the sage as his prize in a game of dice to which he would challenge *King Dhananjya*.

So *Punnaka* challenged the king to a game of dice with the wager that if he lost, he would give the king a wondrous horse and magic gem. The king accepted the challenge and said if *Punnaka* won he could have with the exception of his body, his throne and all he owned. The outcome was that *Punnaka* won and demanded the king to give him *Vidhura* as payment.

The king was reluctant to give up *Vidhura* who he said was "my minister, my refuge and help, my shelter, my fortress and my defence, that minister of mine is not to be weighed against wealth, that minister is like my life."

Punnaka thus asked *Vidhura* whether he was the king's kinsmen or slave. *Vidhura*, who believed firmly that there was no protection in the world such as the truth replied:

"There are four slaves; some are slaves from their mothers, others are slaves bought for money, some come of their own will as slaves, others are slaves driven by fear. These are the four sorts of slaves among men. I verily am a slave from my birth; my weal and my woe come from the king, I am the king's slave even if I go to another, - he may give me by right to thee, O young man."²

On hearing this the king was angry with the Great Being and said, "If he is a slave take him and go". The minister *Vidhura* then requested *Punnaka* that as he was about to leave his family for good, he wished to be given three days grace so that he could give words of advice to his wives, children and attendants *Punnaka* agreed and the following excerpts highlight the essence of *Vidhura's* moral values and moral views.

He first gave advice on how to live if one wished to enter the king's court to serve him.

"...When he enters a king's court he does not win honour while he is unknown, nor does one ever win it who is a coward, nor the foolish man, nor the thoughtless. When the king finds out his moral qualities, his wisdom and his purity of heart, then he learns to trust him and hides not his secrets from him."³

This excerpt shows that *Vidhura* values courage and wisdom as well as purity of mind and honesty. Such qualities make a man worthy of service in the royal court.

"...When he is asked to carry out some business, like a well-fixed balance, with a level bean, and evenly poised, he must not hesitate; if like the balance, he is ready to undertake every burden, he may dwell in a king's court."⁴

He also emphasizes duty. A man must do his duty, but in doing so he must always weigh the pros and cons.

"... Let him not laugh too much, nor keep always silent; he should utter, when the due season comes, a concise and measured speech.

Not given to anger, not ready to take offence, truthful, gentle, no slanderer, let him not speak foolish words,"⁵

He must be moderate in speech and behaviour and be not full of pride and anger.

"Trained, educated, self-controlled, experienced in business, temperate, gentle, careful, pure, skilful, -such an one may dwell in a king's court. Humble in behaviour towards the old, ready to obey, and full of respect, compassionate, and pleasant to live with-such an one may dwell in a king's court."⁶

A man who wishes to serve in a royal court according to *Vidhura* must also be loyal and faithful and fair. He must not favour his kith and kin if they are not worthy. But most of all he must be free from greed. Having had three days to advise his family and kinsfolk *Vidhura* finally took leave of his king. The king was still unwilling to let him go, so he suggested that *Punnaka* be killed. When *Vidhura* heard this he exclaimed:

"Do not set thy mind on unrighteousness, be thou devoted to temporal and spiritual good³; shame on an action which is ignoble and sinful, which when a man has done, he goes afterwards to hell. This is not righteousness, this is not what ought to be done; a king, O lord of men, is the supreme authority of a poor slave, which sets him to kill or to burn or kills by its own act; I have no wrath against him and I depart."⁷

Vidhura, thus made it clear that in life one must choose between good and bad and that some acts are righteous whereas others are ignoble both in spiritual and temporal life; that there are things that ought to be done and ought not to be done. He emphasized the fact that one ought to keep one's word whatever the consequences. In his advice to his family his moral admonitions laid emphasis on the consequences that would follow if one failed to follow moral rules of conduct. But in his reply to the king it can be seen that some actions should be done regardless of consequences. His ethical views are thus both consequentialist and non-consequentialist.

Punnaka tried to frighten *Vidhura*. But *Vidhura* was not at all afraid. He said that he had no one to be afraid of for he had never harmed any one physically, mentally or bodily. Meanwhile *Vidhura's* family members cried. *Punnaka* was set on killing the wise sage in order to obtain his heart for *Vimala*. He tried to kill him in many ways; he assumed the form of a frightful demon, a ferocious lion, a furious elephant, a great serpent; he tried to blow him off the mountain top to which he had taken him. But it was all in vain. After all three attempts *Vidhura* asked *Punnaka* the reason why he wished to kill him.

When *Punnaka* told him why, the *Vidhura* immediately perceived that all concerned had misunderstood the *Nāga queen's* request for his heart. She had not meant his physical heart. It was the heart of his wisdom that she desired. *Vidhura* was content, however, to say simply that if *Punnaka* would first listen to his teachings, he would then be willing to give up his heart to him. So he said; " young man, I know the law as followed by good men; before I die, set me on the top of the mountain and hear the law of good men from me; afterwards do what thou wilt; and after having declared to him the law of good men I will let him take my life."

He then admonished that in whosever's house a man has dwelt even for one night and partaken of drink and food then he should not even harbor evil thoughts against him, let alone kill him. He said; "He who is treacherous burns the innocent hard. Let not a man break a bough under whose shadow he sits or lies- the wretch is treacherous to his friend." The great

sage then explained to his captor the four duties of a good man. The *Yakka* was thus filled with remorse and said he would set *Vidhura* free.

Vidhura replied, "O youth, send me not away to my own home but carry me to the *Nāga* dwelling," He asked to be taken to the *Nāga Kingdom* in order to resolve the misunderstanding. He knew that the queen *Vimala* was not asking for his physical heart, but only to hear his words of wisdom.

All questions resolved, the king gave his daughter to the *yakkha* in marriage and ordered him to return the sage to the court of his king. Once more *Punnaka* called for his magic steed and, carrying *Vidhura* in front and his bride behind, rode off into the sky toward *Indapatta*, the sage's home.

Conclusion

In the *Vidhura Jātaka*, there are attitudes and ways of thinking that differ from the ways of thinking of the West. In this play, *Vidhurapandita*, the *Nāga king* and the *Nāga queen*, *Vimala* and then *Punnaka* are the main characters. The analysis of the *Vidhura Jātaka* shows that both wisdom and moral purity are highly valued. It also highlights the fact that in Buddhism knowledge and wisdom are necessary if one is to lead a good life both in the mundane world and for achievement of liberation from the cycle of birth and rebirth. Since ignorance and delusion lead living beings to unwholesome behavior, knowledge is not for the sake of knowledge only but for living a good life. In Buddhism, wisdom is always associated with good.

In the *Dhammapada* it says:

"If you see a man who shows you what is to be avoided, who administers reproofs, and is intelligent, follow that wise man as you would one who tells of hidden treasures; it will be better, not worse, for him who follows him."⁸

The *Vidhura Jātaka* illustrates the above view. The central figure in the *Vidhura Jātaka* is a wise man. Because of his intelligent he is also a morally upright person with both wisdom and courage. So as Socrates would say "Knowledge is Virtue." In Western thought how, this is often lost sight of and there is a lot of ethical theorizing with no practical guidelines. In *Theravada Buddhist* thought high value is placed on knowledge for knowledge brings about good consequences both in this life and the next. So the consequence of having knowledge is important. In the *Vidhura Jātaka* *Vidhura* escapes a tragic death because he is able to show the way to virtue and goodness first to the *Yakka* or ogre *Punnaka* who is blindly infatuated with the *Nāga* maiden and then he is able to convince the *Nāga King* that he had gained the wealth and splendours of the *Nāga Kingdom* through his own virtuous deeds.

Vidhura here refers to the *Law of Karma* which maintains that good begets good while evil begets evil. An analysis of *Vidhura* deeds show that although wisdom played the leading role, they are also interconnected with truth, righteousness, diligence and moral conduct. All these virtues had helped *Vidhura* to overcome enmity and danger.

Vidhura explains to the *Nāga* king if you cultivate innocence then you would bring merit. One said innocence of word or deed but innocence is a state of the mind, the intent behind the verbal or physical deed. This is the deontological aspect which is not overlooked in the ethics of *Vidhura*. Moreover, regardless of consequences *Vidhura* had submitted to *Punnaka* to preserve the integrity and dignity of his sovereign. He had also shown no fear when he was finally brought into the presence the *Nāga queen* who had desired his heart. Such courage requires a strong will of ultimately, his ethical discourses incorporate strong

will and good intentions along with the consequences of virtuous action. Thus the ethics of the *Vidhura Jātaka*, is one which considers both good intent and good consequences as important in moral conduct.

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Notes

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